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*THE
HIDDEN
HERO*

Books

by

STANLEY KAUFFMANN

.....

The King of Proxy Street

This Time Forever

The Hidden Hero

*THE
HIDDEN
HERO*

*A Story
by
STANLEY KAUFFMANN*

1949

RINEHART & CO., INC.

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IN MEMORIAM JOHN VIEBROCK

I shall find time, Cassius

“From a real antagonist boundless
courage flows into you.”

KAFKA

*THE
HIDDEN
HERO*

CHAPTER ONE

*B*ut, she thought, there's nothing I can do. He's dead. There'll never be anything I can do.

She was sitting in the overstuffed chair at the foot of the bed, looking out the window at what she noticed now was morning. Her name was Eleanor Shafer. She had been alone in this hotel at Calle Niza 130, Mexico City, for three days; she hadn't left her room in that time except for an occasional meal and one short walk.

Now as she noticed belatedly that it was morning, she glanced at her watch. Nine-fifteen. Soon she would have to go, and she couldn't even remember the name of the place to which she was going.

But it didn't matter. The important thing was to get out. She couldn't stare at these walls any longer—the same white walls (dead white, she thought) in all the succession of lights that filtered through the high window from night until night again. She had to get away from the implacable phantoms, the brute facts that swaggered through her mind. Phantoms and pitiless facts, incessantly treading the long sunless corridors of her mind. . . .

. . . Or, if she didn't get away, she would soon lose the last little ledge of sanity from which she viewed their swaggering, she would soon be down there with them, treading the corridors with them inside her hot, twisted head. . . .

She had spoken to the man at the desk in the lobby and he had made arrangements for a drive. She had forgotten the name of the destination but it didn't matter. She merely wanted something to fill up the giant empty hours, to smother the tick-tick-inexorable-tick of time and memory, some show of enforced action to keep her mind turned outward. This drive would take a whole day; she had welcomed it.

Nine twenty-five. The fresh morning sun filigreed the room with Mexican gold; she could smell the clear sky without looking up for it. Gazing out across the city, she smiled (oh, no, not herself smiling) at a sleek modern skyscraper which rose stubbornly out of a clump of old ornate Spanish roofs.

. . . She clung to the weak warmth of that smile, a flicker in the cold. I do not choose to go insane, she thought. I'm not sure I'd mind *being* insane now, any more than I'd mind being dead. It's becoming one or the other that's so frightening, so troublesome. . . .

Nine-thirty. Now she was due down at the desk. For a moment she felt panic at the prospect of having to meet people and shake hands and chat-chat, how-do-you-like-Mexico; but then she thought of staying here in this room, alone. And not alone.

She locked her door and went down in the automatic elevator.

She had been introduced to Teodoro, the driver, the night before. Now she saw his long-waisted, slightly bow-legged figure across the lobby, attired in natty sports clothes and colorful shirt. Some people were with him.

She hurried over. "Good morning, Teodoro," she said. "I'm sorry I kept everyone waiting."

"You dint," said Teodoro. "They ain't even all here yet. Uh, this here is Mr. Knapp and Miss Dana." Eleanor saw that they were two people and that they were nodding-smiling at her and that she must do the same. Teodoro turned to Eleanor to introduce her. "And this is . . ." He hesitated and flashed a gold-flecked grin. "Gosh, I'm sorry. I forget already."

"Miss Shafer," said Eleanor. *Who?* she thought.

"Shafer," nodded Teodoro. "I remember it yet." They greeted her. "We only got to wait for one more," he said.

"Teodoro," Eleanor said, "I've forgotten the name of the place we're going to."

Just like a tourist, he reflected. Pay good money to go some place and not even know where it is. "Toluca. Sixty-five kilometers. We see the Friday market." He looked across the lobby. "Here's now the man we wait for."

Roy Anderson was coming across the lobby from a girl. He was thirty-two and middling tall, but he seemed taller because he was broad-shouldered. His brown hair was cut very short; that, plus the fact that his face was tight-skinned, made him look like a riper collegian. This was a useful appearance; since he appeared to be quite young, people were often appreciatively surprised by his comparative maturity.

He had been in Mexico for four days, and had just said good-bye to Teresa in his room. She worked in the office of his company's local exchange: he had met her two days ago when he called to see the manager. This morning he was plagued by the usual house-of-cards feeling that bothered him on mornings after, the humorous disgust at counting the casual an achievement. He was glad that he had arranged for this trip.

The day before, Roy had hired a car and driver to go down to Cuernavaca to visit an old friend. He and Teodoro, who was the driver assigned to him, had got along so well that he had asked the guide to suggest a few other trips they might take together. Teodoro had proposed Toluca. "Once a week market on Friday," Teodoro had said. "I think you like, Señor Roy." Teodoro had warned him that he was already committed to a few other passengers, but Roy had agreed to go anyway. He wanted to see the market and he enjoyed Teodoro's company.

There was the guide now. Three people with him. "Hello, Teodoro," he said. "Sorry to be late."

"Well," said the guide, "they only all just got here." He went through the introductions again. This time he remembered Eleanor's name, merely mispronouncing it.

Then he led them to a two-toned Buick at the curb. Roy got in the front seat with Teodoro after the other passengers had declined. "Vamonos," said the driver, and they started westward out of the city.

In an incredibly short time after leaving the heart of the city, they wound along a mountain road with goats clambering among the rocks, with pines prodding the bright sky. "My goodness," said Miss Dana, who was about forty and pathetically pretty, "I had no idea Mexico was like this. I mean, I thought it was cactuses, like."

"Oh, plenty of cactus, too," said Teodoro over his shoulder. He was wearing polaroid sunglasses and drove with the ease of the skilled driver who takes his job seriously. "Maguey cactuses right over there. But you thinking of deserts. Up here is mountains. Green and farms and like that. We got all kinds of scenery in Mexico. As many as in your country."

Roy said, "It's the air that surprises me. We have plenty of sun and sky in the part of California I come from, but the air there is only air. Here it's full of bubbles."

"Seventy-five hundred feet high," nodded Teodoro proudly, as if he were responsible for the altitude, "and going up."

Through Lerma they drove, past the trout hatchery. Valleys fell away sheerly to one side with boys tending cattle by streams below. Woods and steep fields rose above them where sandaled farmers were hard at work with their oxen. They passed an Indian family on the road; the man was straddling a burro and the woman walked behind with a baby on her back. Roy made a remark. Everyone laughed but Eleanor; she hadn't heard it.

Mr. Knapp, a Texan, turned to her. "Well, little lady, you seem a million miles away. Penny for your thoughts."

Dead, she remembered. *And dead and dead . . .*

Spheres higher, she thought of how Ralph would have loved this. But he was dead. Because of her.

Aloud she said, "I'm sorry. I guess I just wasn't listening."

Mr. Knapp repeated Roy's remark, enjoying it more the second time. Eleanor smiled, and nodded twice in lieu of laughter. Mr. Knapp, still chuckling, said, "Say, if you're the dreamy type, Miss Shafer, we'll have to keep our eye on you at the market, to see you don't get lost, strayed or stolen. Teodoro here says it's a mighty busy place."

The market was supposed to be held in a huge armory-like building provided by the government, but the stalls and stands and booths overflowed into the surrounding streets. The crowd was thick and mobile; it was always moving, yet for minutes at a time you could make no progress with it or through it. There were stands at which Indians sold incredible foods to other Indians; there were dozens of other stands at which baskets and serapes and pottery and huaraches and leatherwork were on display; yet the majority of the sellers seemed to be merchants who were peddling goods

to the Indians, rather than Indians vending their own wares. Mousetraps, safety pins, flashlights, nail polish, bolts and bolts of cheap gaudy cloth. Mr. Knapp, who was photographing away by the foot, took one picture of a wrinkled old unshaven Indian in sombrero and tattered serape contemplating a display of fresh pink bloomers and brassières.

It was all loud and smelly and fascinating. Outside, the striped awnings that tented the streets were brilliant in the drenching sunlight against the green hills at the end of the avenue. Under Teodoro's guidance the party made its way through the mob in single file, more or less, but when they decided to leave for lunch they discovered that Eleanor was missing. Roy remembered a turn in the arcade where she might have been lost; he went back for her.

He saw her at last in a corner of the bazaar, in a quiet oasis in the middle of the throng. She stood before a fruit stand, looking down at an Indian girl who sat behind it nursing a baby. The girl looked up at Eleanor with dark glistening eyes that were the loveliest feature in a crude flat face; and she said things in Spanish and laughed a little with the words.

Roy watched them for a moment, watched Eleanor principally. He saw how she looked—a corduroy suit, a shoulder bag, black hair that was several other colors in the strong light—and he realized that he was admiring her almost impersonally, objectively, which was not usual for him with girls. However, he liked the feeling and liked her the more for providing the occasion for it. He had hardly had a good look at her before; he could see now that it was not just another face. Her profile, the line of her head and neck and shoulders, made this oasis in the teeming market seem quieter.

He remembered that the others were waiting. He went forward. "Hello," he said. "We've been looking for you, Miss Shafer. We're all about to have lunch."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Eleanor quickly. "I was watching her."

"I know, I was watching you watch her. Do you speak Spanish?"

"No."

The girl with the baby at her breast said something in a soft purling voice and nodded.

"I must go now," said Eleanor. "Good-bye." The girl spoke something soft again and smiled shyly.

As they walked back to join the others, Eleanor said, "Thanks for coming after me, Mr. Anderson. I didn't realize I'd stopped so long."

He was shading his eyes from the sun with his hand, peering ahead to see where the others were. "Miss Shafer," he said, "what's your name? Do you mind telling me?"

"No. It's Eleanor."

"Thanks. Mine is Roy."

"Where you been?" grinned Teodoro when they rejoined him. "I thought maybe they catch you and cut you up for barbecue sangwiches."

Teodoro took them to what was obviously the cleanest restaurant in Toluca, and after lunch they saw a little of the not especially interesting town. Then they stowed Miss Dana's and Mr. Knapp's purchases in the car trunk and started back.

This time at Roy's particular invitation, Miss Dana rode in the front seat next to Teodoro. However, they were all somewhat tired now, and there were long stretches of silence in the speeding car. Roy leaned back and smoked and thought that he had had a thoroughly good time, all things considered, and occasionally looked at Eleanor.

She sat with her hands pressed between her knees, wishing that it would take longer to return. The room was waiting for her, smugly, ineluctably. The sun was sinking, the

night was rushing on, and she wished that the ride would stretch and stretch.

Miss Dana and Mr. Knapp had arranged earlier with Teodoro to drive out to Teotihuacán next day to see the pyramids and temples. They reminded him of it now. "Hey, you want to come too, Señor Roy?" Teodoro called over his shoulder. "You ought to see all that stuff out there."

"Sure, I'll go," Roy laughed.

Teodoro was not backward. "How about you, Miss Shafer? You come tomorrow?"

Well, she could go or not go. She could go home to Connecticut or out to California or to South America or the moon. What was the difference? The important thing was to keep something moving in front of her eyes, a puppet show in the outward world to distract her.

"All right, Teodoro," she said, "I'll come along."

The Pyramid of the Sun made her feel better for a time. Its hugeness—not its symmetry or design or marvelous construction or any fancier reason—its sheer hugeness was comforting. While she looked at it, it was impossible to believe that anything else in the world, real or abstract, could exist; it focalized credence on itself.

The same four people had driven out with Teodoro again next day, and at Teotihuacán the guide delivered a well-rehearsed speech about the Temple of the Plumed Serpent and the Avenue of Death and the legend of Quetzalcoatl. Roy had read about this place the night before in a guide-book and knew that Teodoro saw the facts as through a glass darkly, but nevertheless he listened attentively.

The little group dispersed briefly before lunch. Eleanor rested awhile on the hill facing the pyramid, then strolled back toward the great temple and the spacious sunken courtyard bordered by stark shrines. The sky was cloudless; her sharp shadow walked along next to her.

The black mimic, she thought. The grotesque me. "I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me" . . .

I have a little shadow that goes on and on with me.

She came upon Roy sitting on the stone steps of one of the minor altars, gazing out over the sunken court. The whole cluster of structures on this hill was thrust upward against the flawless, illimitable sky.

"Sit down," he invited her. He looked reticent and nice sitting in his checked jacket under an immense heaven in this ancient place. She sat on the stone step too.

He indicated the large view with a small gesture. "What do you think of it?" She shook her head, conveying that there was nothing adequate to say. "Exactly," he agreed.

"I wonder," he said, "whether these old Aztecs and Toltecs had any music. There's almost always music where there are religions and temples. I wonder whether they had any. I'd love to hear some of it."

"You like music?"

He looked at her before he spoke, not thinking of his answer, merely looking at her. "Yes," he said, "and I'm not ashamed to admit it." She gave him the smile he wanted for his joke.

Through his sunglasses he studied her face covertly. Her eyes were gray, large—almost too large for her face. Her features were small: a short straight nose with the suggestion of a turned-up tip; a little mouth but soft and curved; a good white brow. It was a lovely face, not by any calendar-girl standards of dummy prettiness, but touching; a communicating face.

And she had an attractive voice. It was clear and gentle, with a wonderful sexless intimacy. Roy was very conscious of voices since he was not particularly fond of his own.

She sat now with her hands between her knees. A small girl.

"I'll tell you one thing I think about this place," she

said. "I never saw a temple before, any religious building, that had the feeling in it of the country all around."

"Yes," he nodded quickly, "the same big under-the-sky feeling. It's in the shape of those altars, in the way the whole place is laid out."

The rest of the party came along soon, and Teodoro took them to lunch in a near-by restaurant which was located in a great open grotto. It was cool and lovely in there after the relentless sun and they all relaxed over their soft drinks and beer.

Miss Dana had heard from Teodoro just before lunch that Roy worked for a movie company; she was bursting to question him about it. At last she brought up the subject, adding, "Not that I mean to pry, but it's awfully interesting. I mean, I never met anyone before who worked in the movies."

"Well, I'm not in them," Roy said, "just around them."

"Are you a cameraman?" she asked.

"No, I'm in the story department, at Peerless. That doesn't mean I write stories," he said.

"I know," Miss Dana nodded. "That means you pick them."

"Well, I recommend them to the man who picks them. I'm his assistant." He saw that they were interested—Teodoro was wearing that scowl which was his badge of attention—so Roy, feeling expansive in the pleasant cool of the grotto, talked for a bit about his job. (Besides, a corner of his consciousness didn't at all mind Eleanor's hearing.) He answered their questions, of which Miss Dana and Mr. Knapp had some, Teodoro a few, Eleanor none. "And then sometimes," continued Roy, answering a question, "they build a picture around an original idea."

"You mean like a short story?" asked Mr. Knapp. "Not even a whole book or a Broadway play?"

"Sometimes not even a short story," said Roy. "Some-

times just a—a kind of scheme.” He hesitated. “For instance—” he hesitated again—“well, I don’t suppose my talking about it here will make any difference. It’s probably all set by now anyway.” Miss Dana’s eyes blinked wider as she anticipated a Hollywood secret and Roy, even as he thought “poor sap,” couldn’t resist a gratifying feeling of Jovian dispensation. “For instance, they accepted a picture idea of mine just a few weeks before I left on vacation. An aviation epic. They wanted to make an action story—without bringing in war—so I suggested a picture based on the flying heroes of the late twenties and early thirties. All bound together by a story line, a kind of cavalcade. And of course dramatizing some of those actual flights. Lindbergh, Byrd, Earl Seastrom, Clarence Chamberlin. Men like that.”

“Oh, it sounds like a wonderful idea,” said Miss Dana, “I must watch for it. What’s the name of it?”

“The title I suggested was ‘High Heroes.’ ”

“Well, you never can tell,” said Mr. Knapp. “May come out and they’ll call it somethin’ like ‘Love in the Sky.’ ”

“Or ‘The Neatest Trick of the Week,’ ” said Roy. They laughed, and he glanced at Eleanor. She smiled too, to show that she was present and had heard. He suddenly felt that he had been talking too much and too long; he was suddenly quite tired of his own voice.

Back home he usually spoke about the studio in one of two ways, both equally effective. Wearily, hand through hair: “Christ, that grind at the studio is driving me bats. One headache after another. Why do I stick at it?”; or bored, flicking cigarette ash: “Yes, I’m in pictures. Don’t ask me why.” Both moods titillated the wide-eyed, the repressed, the cravers after tiger-skin couches. But here, now, any talk at all about pictures suddenly struck him as nonsense; alien and trifling.

. . . Particularly when he remembered why he had taken the trouble to come to Mexico.

On the way back to the city they visited the old monastery of Acolmán, on the plain that had been submerged for so many years. While they were traversing one of the dark monastic passages, Miss Dana invited Eleanor to join her that evening for dinner and perhaps a movie, if they could find one that neither of them had seen. Eleanor declined, with thanks, saying that she was previously engaged.

It was perfectly true, she thought. She knew precisely how she would be engaged.

Roy, overhearing her reply, wished that she were previously engaged with him. Then he thought of Teresa, whom he would see that night, and he shrugged inwardly. Oh, well . . . for small favors . . .

The moonlight slithered around the walls of Eleanor's room, embracing it, losing it with a cloud, embracing it again. For a while, she tried to sleep. Then she stopped trying. She got up and sat by the window, smoking a cigarette and trembling. Then she walked up and down the room, clasped and unclasped by the moonlight. Suddenly she stopped and sat on the edge of a chair, stiffly, like a child at her first dance. Then, with a brief sigh, she put her head in her hands.

All the exquisite anguish in the world seemed distilled and casked in that room. All the choking misery . . . cramming her lungs at each breath. . . .

A great heavy fog, enveloping and fathomless. Fog bred fuming out of hard, precise facts. Formless fog out of three hard facts. Ralph was dead. He need not have died. He was dead because of her.

One, two, three. Immutable facts.

"Three blind facts," she murmured, nearly humming. . . and giggled once. Then she said quietly, "God."

It was after midnight, but she had to get out of the room. She couldn't escape the facts and phantoms here, but

other people, other worlds, might help to mask them. She slipped on a dress, she combed her hair, she held her hands to her cheeks and looked into the mirror, through the mirror, past the mirror. She considered briefly, almost cheerfully, whether there was any point in continuing to live, then turned off the light and went downstairs.

The bar had once been a patio in the heart of the hotel. It had since been roofed over with a huge skylight and was forested with potted palms along the walls. The permanent residents called it "The Jungle." The bartender, spry and fresh despite the hour, came over to her table for her order and returned shortly with a Scotch and water. She sipped it slowly, transferring to it a faith that had long since deserted heaven. She had sipped about three-quarters of it, wondering how many more she would need before she dared to go back upstairs, when Roy came in with a girl. They were both rocking slightly. They sat at a table near the door and ordered drinks.

Roy and Teresa had been dancing. Then she had taken him to a café over in the old town where they had listened to native songs and had drunk tequila. They had stopped in here for a nightcap on their way upstairs. He was sorry now because, seeing Eleanor, allowing Eleanor to see him with Teresa, he was indefinably and illogically embarrassed. Why? No obligations anywhere. Besides, nothing wrong with Teresa. Matter of fact, damned attractive girl; black hair, copper-smooth skin, slanty green eyes. Maybe a bit drunk at present but so was he. Still, when he returned Eleanor's wave of the hand, he felt as if his wig were on backwards. So to speak.

For her part, Eleanor, after the merest glance at the girl—enough to see that she was quite good-looking—turned in her seat so as not to seem to be watching. She finished her Scotch and began another. Between sips, with her hands in her lap, she studied the palm fronds in front of her and felt

the high hollow echoes of the skylighted room foregather and sneer above her. Now a pin point of cold hollow laughter, now a bomb, now a pin point again, in the small of her back.

The ebb and swell were halted by real words. Angry words. Roy and his girl were talking loudly. Now they were bickering. Now quarreling. She tried hard not to listen, but they were getting louder and their voices carried flat up against her ears in the almost empty room.

The gist of it was that if he didn't like the way she talked, what was he going to do about it? He'd show her what he'd do about it and would she kindly sit the hell down? Oh, yeah . . . who'd he think he was, her boss? Who was he, giving orders? If he was ashamed to be seen with her, why didn't he say so? Plenty of men, plenty good as him would be glad to . . . Yes, he was sure there were plenty . . .

. . . Eleanor heard a chair scrape back. Then Roy said, angrily-wearily, "Oh, for God's sake, sit down and stop acting like yourself." Eleanor turned just in time to see the girl grab an empty Coca-Cola bottle and hit Roy on the head. Then the girl snatched up her white-fuzzy-fur-collared coat and stormed out of the bar.

Roy's head had slumped forward onto the table. The bartender ran over and Eleanor went to him too. Roy wasn't unconscious but he was dizzy. The bartender, frightened into Spanish, jabbered rapidly as he helped lift Roy erect in his chair. "Wow," said Roy softly, holding his head. "Wow."

The bartender recaptured some English. "You want police, señor? I see everything. You want police?"

Roy shook his head once. He muttered, "No, just wanta lie down."

The bartender looked around nervously for help or suggestion. Eleanor said, "I'll take care of him. I know him. I'll help him up to his room." The little man was much

relieved. She took Roy's arm. "Mr. Anderson. Roy. Do you think you can walk?"

Roy didn't answer.

The bartender helped him to his feet. He was unsteady, but he could navigate. Eleanor held his arm. "That's it." His key, attached to the hotel's enormous metal identification tag, was on the table; the bartender handed it to her. "Thank you," she said. "And probably Mr. Anderson would appreciate it if you didn't say anything about all this."

The bartender bobbed his head. "Understan', señorita, understan'."

She helped Roy up the three steps to the alcove and the elevator. His room number was on the tag; she pressed the button for his floor. While the tiny elevator droned up, he leaned against the wall and stared at the floor as if he were ashamed. But she knew it was merely because he was out on his feet.

When they reached the room he headed straight for the bed and flopped on it heavily. She wriggled his jacket off, then removed his shoes and loosened his tie. His eyes were closed, but he began to moan a little and rub his head. She went into the bathroom and dampened a hand towel with cold water. She bound it around his forehead, and he stopped moaning and seemed to settle back into the bed.

She decided she ought to stay with him awhile in case he needed anything. He was alone, like herself, in a strange place. He might need a doctor. She would wait a bit and see. She sat in an armchair facing the bed. She would just stay until she was sure he was asleep.

When she woke, the morning sun was draped across her knees. He was sitting up in bed, watching her and smoking.

CHAPTER TWO

*H*e grinned. It had been pleasant to lie there watching her sleep in the big chair with her hands between her knees and her head turned delicately to one side; and now he liked the fact that, when she woke, she wasn't startled or embarrassed.

In a moment she said, "I was supposed to watch you."

"I gathered that. Thanks anyway."

"How's your head?"

"A little cloudy. But it hurts only when I touch it. So I won't touch it. . . . What happened exactly?"

She told him.

"And you helped me upstairs and took care of me? You're a nice girl. But I suspected that all along."

Eleanor regarded him calmly. It was too much trouble now to recapture the protocol, the parries, of man-and-woman talk; all of that seemed remote and cold, frozen where it fell. His remark, a couple of weeks ago (a hundred years ago), might have caused a guardedness in her. Now she merely said, "Thank you. It wasn't much to do."

"Don't go yet," said Roy. She hadn't made any move to

leave; she said so. "I know," he continued, "but you might have been thinking of it. Don't go for a while. Just sit there—in that chair."

It didn't matter much to her one way or the other. She didn't mind staying. This room, although not vastly different from her own, was at least a rearrangement. Besides, the man over there was looking at her nicely, and if he hadn't penetrated even the outermost circle of her feelings, at least she recognized that he was friendly, he meant well.

"All right," she said, "if you like. For a few minutes. If you won't ask me questions."

"O.K.," he agreed, and puffed on his cigarette.

She looked out the window. Across the court, on a wrought-iron balcony rail, a pair of black silk stockings dangled idly, knowingly, in the sun. Below, out of sight, a rooster crowed.

He smiled. "I never heard that before, in a big hotel."

"Neither have I," she said.

"Sounds funny here. Rooster crow always makes me smell cedar and patchwork quilts. My room back home."

"In the country?"

"Yes."

"In California?"

"No, New York. Upstate. I've only lived in California for two years."

She nodded, in a way of hers, as if she had always known what she had just learned.

"Two years," he repeated. "Seems funny, to think it's been so short. I lived in New York City for thirteen years, college and after, and I never felt as settled there as I do on the Coast after two years. Quite a place."

"Did you do the same work in New York?" She remembered that he had talked about his job at lunch yesterday; but she hadn't really listened. All the time, in that cool rock-grotto, she had felt that she was sitting at table under-

water with drowned people. "The kind of work you were talking about yesterday?"

"No, not exactly. I worked for a couple of magazines and book houses."

That was a horrible way to put it, he thought. So bald and compressed. So denuded it was almost obscene. There was so much more to the story: a lot that he liked to think of and some that he shrugged about and ascribed to an inexorable pattern. But in a perverse way he was proud even of those latter things because they proved he had been important enough to become part of the pattern.

His story. He usually began with himself as valedictorian of his high school class (in double-breasted blue serge) speaking his brave speech in the stucco movie house where Commencement was held because the H.S. Aud. was too small. As valedictorian, he had won the annual scholarship to Metropolitan University awarded by a Metropolitan trustee who was a native of Roy's village. Four years. Thence, after graduation (in a three-dollar rented cap and gown), on the strength of that same trustee's recommendation, to a junior post with a book publisher. Two years. Thence (in a chainstore one-button English drape) to a junior post on a magazine. Four years. Thence (in a two-button Harris tweed jacket and hound's-tooth slacks) to a senior post on a magazine. Three years. Thence (in a three-pearl-buttoned genuine camel's-hair topcoat) at the age of thirty, to the assistant editorship of the story department of Peerless Pictures in Hollywood. As of now, two years. Thence? . . . When? . . . How many buttons? . . .

"Do you like your work?" she asked.

"Well, it has its advantages. For one thing, I'm very good at it, and it's always pleasant to do the things you're good at. And California's such a comfortable place to live."

"It must be," she said. Then, as if someone behind her

were speaking, she heard herself ask: "Is it true that in California the pedestrian has the right of way?"

Roy peered curiously at her and laughed. "It's theoretically true." He seized the theme and rambled on, comparing the pedestrian-auto battle in California with that in Mexico, talking just to keep talk alive between them. As he spoke, questions about her tumbled through his head in spite of her warning against them.

She sensed them coming and got up. "I must go now, I'm afraid."

He rose too. "Please," he said, "you owe me something. I'm obliged to you for what you did last night. You owe me the chance to show my gratitude."

The slickness of this was faintly repellent to her; still, somewhere underneath the conscious charm, the self-approved social adeptness, there might be a different man, she thought. "What is it you want?"

"I'd like you to have dinner with me tonight."

"Thank you," she said soberly, "but there wouldn't really be any point in it."

"I'd enjoy it." He added, with a smile, "But perhaps that's not point enough."

"It has nothing to do with you, Roy. And I won't tell you I have an engagement. I'd just simply rather be alone. I'd just rather not be anyone's—dinner guest."

"Well, I don't want to press," said Roy, "or be a boor. But I wish you'd come. You wouldn't have to talk or anything. And I won't ask you questions."

"Then why do you want me to come?"

He shrugged. "I like to look at you."

She paused a moment, wishing she were well out of this. She didn't want to be a partner in this kind of conversation. She didn't want any responsibilities or obligations; she didn't want any kindnesses done her. She began to say "no."

He anticipated it. "Don't say anything now. I'll be in

the lobby at six. I'll wait till half past six. I hope you'll join me."

She opened the door. "Good night. Or I suppose it's good morning."

She undressed by sunlight, pulled down the shade in her room, and soon fell into a deep sleep. For a while it was as dreamless as the nap in Roy's chair; and she was conscious of enjoying it. Then a dream began, and with the darkness sheared back on the point of a burning spear, she saw herself tied to a stake in the middle of a high-towered city, while traffic and people poured around her and through her, and the same three facts, so well known that she almost felt friendly recognition toward them, were borne past to taunt her. They glittered past on electric signs, they were carried past on banners, were shouted past by mobs. And (as in life, she told her dreaming self) the abiding horror was that there was nothing she could do.

She forgot about Roy completely. She slept until twelve-thirty and had coffee in her room. Then she spent the afternoon reading and crying and thinking. When it grew dark, she felt hungry. She dressed, took a coat in case she decided to step outside for a breath of air, and went downstairs.

As she walked into the lobby, she saw him sitting in one of the more uncomfortable chairs, sitting there presumably because it afforded a view of the elevator, so there was no way she could avoid him. A sudden barrier of fright reared itself before her and behind as she was penned in toward an unavoidable fact.

Roy put a letter back in his pocket and crossed the lobby to her. "I didn't really expect it," he said. "I'm honored. I'm glad."

It was easier now to drift. "Well, I warned you," she said. "You'll be bored."

"You'll never know," he smiled. Then he said, "I won't be bored."

It was raining hard, the autumnal Mexico City rain that comes late every afternoon for almost precisely one hour, pours torrents, and then abruptly stops. Roy suggested that they go to dinner around the corner at a restaurant far superior to the hotel's; until the rain let up they waited in the bar.

"How's your head?" she asked, as they settled on bar stools.

"Oh," he replied, glancing involuntarily upward, "fine, fine. Almost forgot I had one. Still just a little sore to the touch. You'll forgive me if I don't wear my hat indoors tonight."

She smiled as a defense against being amused and thought with an arrow of panic that she couldn't go through with it—two, maybe three hours of being the only person with him, of having attention focused on her, having to sustain her share of the performance . . .

"Well," said Roy, "here are our drinks."

The bartender wasn't the man who had been on duty last night. This one seemed quite surly.

"The man last night was nicer," said Eleanor. "And he was so frightened when you were hurt that I felt sorrier for him than for you. Oh, I forgot to tell you. He promised not to say anything."

"About what?"

"About what happened. I thought you wouldn't want him spreading stories. To embarrass you and your friend."

"Fr—?" His brows contracted. "Oh, you mean Teresa. Funny, I never would have thought of that word in connection with her. . . . Well, I don't think he can embarrass me. Not about Teresa—" He scratched his chin. "Know something? I don't even know her last name."

"I see. Well," said Eleanor gravely, "I guess you'll never learn it now."

He smiled, then he laughed aloud, meanwhile watching her as she sat perched small on the high stool, looking back at him calm-sad-eyed. Now, as he laughed, a swift backward path cleared through his mind. He understood now what had happened in this bar last night. In spite of the intervening fogs of tequila and assault, he knew now why he had quarreled with Teresa.

Well, he was sitting here with Eleanor tonight. Sic transit Teresa mundi.

The drilling of the rain soon ceased on the huge skylight over the bar. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"I guess I am."

They finished their drinks and left the hotel, passing the omnipresent cab drivers and serape vendors. They walked around the block, past the American Embassy, and came to a low modern building which, Roy said, would not have been out of place on The Strip in Hollywood. The interior was very veloured and extremely indirectly lighted. They were shown to a table next to a plate-glass wall overlooking a patio. The glass was in two strata a few feet apart; between the sheets of glass, parakeets and lovebirds played and swung.

Roy suggested that he order for both of them, and she readily agreed. He selected shrimps with lime and a double steak Chateaubriand. He wanted to order a quart of sparkling Burgundy, but she said she'd just have another Martini before dinner.

As they sipped their cocktails, he reflected that this evening was going to be his to carry. Oh, she was cordial enough, but it was as if she were cordial in a foreign language. With another girl, he might have resented it, but he could see that this was no arrogant case of "entertain me." This girl seemed wrapped in an invisible veil. And two

things intrigued him: her unassertive loveliness and the reasons for that veil.

Seen some kind of trouble, probably. Well, he preferred people who'd had troubles; they were almost always more interesting, providing that they hadn't become humorless en route.

He took out the letter he had been reading when she came into the lobby. "I've got to make a trip tomorrow. On business."

"I thought you were here on a vacation."

"I was. And I will be again, day *after* tomorrow. But this thing's come up that I have to take care of. You remember what I was talking about at lunch yesterday? The aviation picture I suggested to the studio?" To save time she said that she remembered. "Well," he continued with a little laugh, "I was showing off before company yesterday, and I've been paid back for it good and proper. The darned thing's reared its ugly head smack in the middle of my vacation. It seems the studio's been whipping right along on the picture, getting it ready for production. They've got permission to use the names and lives—what they need of the lives—of four out of the five big heroes of the period; but they're having a little trouble with Seastrom."

"Earl Seastrom, is that?"

"Yes."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The simplest," he laughed. "They haven't found him yet. They heard he was working in an aeronautical plant in Marion, Ohio, and our Chicago man went down there to see him. But they told him there that Seastrom had left almost seven years ago, to come down to Mexico. To a place called Patzcuaro. So the studio air-mailed me this letter, asking me whether—since I'm down here anyway—whether I'd go to see Seastrom, talk business with him, and sign him up."

"And you're going tomorrow?"

"Yes. I've already spoken to Teodoro—he's going to drive me to this Patzcuaro place. He says we can make it easily in a day. Then, with good luck, we can be back by night after next."

"You know," said Eleanor; then she paused and looked at the parakeets. "You know," she said after a moment, "I just remembered something."

"What's that?"

"When Earl Seastrom came to New York, I helped to welcome him. When he made his triumphal return."

He looked puzzled. "Are you sure? It was fifteen years ago."

She nodded slowly, her gaze fixed off beyond Roy. She looked as if she were reading reminders of that time on the wall of the restaurant. "Yes," she said, "there was a group from my school—and I was one of them."

"Fifth Avenue bordered with lines of school children," Roy smiled. "I was reading about it in the files just a few weeks ago, doing research for the story. And you were one of the children."

"Yes. I suppose every school in the city sent a group."

"You come from New York?" he ventured.

"No, not really. But I was living there then." She seemed not so much to avoid his question as to be intrigued by memories of that day. One drew another after it, like a chain that was longer than she had thought. "With flags. We all carried flags. I remember we were warned all the week before that if we misbehaved we wouldn't be allowed to go to the parade. I remember Miss Mannion saying that it would be something to tell our grandchildren, that we had welcomed Earl Seastrom."

Now for the first time she seemed to Roy to lean forward, to be present. For some reason, this old story, this curious memento, seemed briefly to crack the implicit wall

around her. It was as if he could glimpse swiftly the girl she had been; and might be.

He meant to keep this going. "It was in June, wasn't it? I think I read that the New York reception was in June."

"Yes. I remember the morning of the parade. A beautiful June day. Fifth Avenue was lined along the curb for miles with children; and behind us, grownups packed right to the buildings."

"Whereabouts were you? Whereabouts on Fifth Avenue, I mean?"

"I'll never forget. My place—my school's place—was just in front of the north Library lion." She spoke quietly but vividly, searching out this day in the dusty mountain of discarded days, freshening and displaying it. "We had to get there early that morning, I think at nine o'clock or some such hour, and the parade didn't pass till after twelve. My feet hurt, I remember. First one foot, then the other. And then finally when his car came along, everyone pushed forward in front of me so that I couldn't see a thing. Imagine. After looking forward to it for a week and then standing there for more than three hours. I didn't know what to do. No one could hear me, they were all screaming around me, and I wasn't strong enough to push my way through. So I did the only thing I could. I jumped straight up in the air, to get a look at him. And, do you know, at the precise moment that I jumped, his car passed . . ."

She folded her arms on the table, still looking off, past Roy. "I got only a quick glimpse of him. He was sitting high up on the back of the open car, smiling and waving his hand—in the middle of all the floating ticker tape and everyone screaming all around me. Really, it's funny, I don't suppose I saw him for more than half a second, and yet I can still see it," she said, "just as clearly . . ."

. . . A grinning young man with a cleft chin and very brown hair, his tie pulled down, his collar unbuttoned. Wav-

ing the black-and-white-checked cap that was inseparably associated with him. The clothes he had worn on his flight. . . .

("Wears Flying Togs In Welcome Parade!
'Didn't Fly Pacific in Cutaway And Not Going
To Wear One Today' Says America's Earl")

"It's odd. How I remember it all," said Eleanor.

Fifteen years before, Earl Seastrom and Doug Connell set out to better the nonstop flight record held by the English aviators, Gayford and Nicholetts. The Englishmen had flown from England to South-West Africa, 5,341 miles, in fifty-seven hours and twenty-five minutes. Seastrom and Connell, in a plane of their own design, planned to fly six thousand miles nonstop in sixty hours, from San Francisco to Auckland, New Zealand—southwest across the face of the globe in two and a half days.

All the world watched as the young airmen, having chosen a route which meant death if they blundered, took off on the greatest flight any human being had ever attempted. And they came so close to their goal that it was considered achieved. One of their motors failed when they were almost in sight of New Zealand, and they crashed into the sea. Connell was killed and Seastrom floated around in the Pacific night for ten hours with a life preserver and a piece of wreckage. He was picked up two miles offshore and only seventeen miles from the airfield for which they had readed six thousand miles away.

The world wept, the world cheered. It seemed as though they meant to shower on Seastrom alone the honors they had intended for both men. His triumphal return—Honolulu, San Francisco, across the country to New York and Washington—was one long-sustained shout, a whirling nimbus of cheers, flags, headlines, flashbulbs, confetti. The whole

country thrilled when Congress approved his Special Medal with a clamorous voice vote and when the President hung the decoration around his neck on the White House lawn. The whole country trembled and blinked when Earl carried the other, posthumous Special Medal to the hospital where Mrs. Connell lay prostrated.

Seth Tennant, the great newspaper publisher and the backer of the flight, spoke for millions when he said: "If I had a son, I'd want him to be exactly like Earl Seastrom. The degree to which he resembled Earl would be the measure of my pride. . . ."

"I wonder," said Eleanor, "how I remember all about that parade so clearly. And why it all comes back now.

"Maybe," she continued quietly, "because he was a hero. And I want to remember a hero just now."

"What did you say?" asked Roy. He had heard her, but he hadn't understood. She shook her head—he couldn't tell whether to indicate that it was unimportant or that she wouldn't repeat it.

"Well," he said, "don't you think the Seastrom story will make a wonderful sequence in the picture?"

"I don't know. People used to get hysterical about things like that. Do they still?"

"Peerless is hoping that they still do. I think they will. After all, it still seems a pretty heroic thing; the passing of time hasn't dulled it much. And for those who are old enough, there's the extra sugar coating of nostalgia. I remember when, and so forth."

Eleanor said, "I wonder what he looks like now. After fifteen years."

"Would you like to see?" asked Roy suddenly. "Would you like to come along?"

The moment he said it he was sorry. He didn't really know her, he didn't know what entanglements it would in-

volve, he had simply blurted out the invitation at the top of the moment, a moment in which she had seemed smaller and prettier than ever. But to cover his qualms, which he was afraid might be apparent, he repeated the invitation. "I heard what you said just now, even though I pretended not to. About why you remembered the parade. I haven't the faintest idea what it meant—except that you'd probably be interested in meeting Seastrom. And I'd love to have you come along."

She frowned slightly and answered at once. "Oh, no. Thank you very much. No."

"But why not? It's a lovely ride. Teodoro says the country up that way is beautiful—it's past Toluca—and you could see Lake Patzcuaro. There's a very good hotel on the lake, he says. He could wire ahead for another room."

"It's very kind of you. Thank you. But I can't."

"Do you have something else planned for the next two days?"

"No, it isn't that. . . . Well, yes, I have. . . ."

"You could come. Couldn't you—honestly?"

"It's very kind of you—"

"Now stop saying it's kind," he interrupted, precisely in order to bolster his sincerity. "I'd *like* you to come. I think *you'd* like it."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't be a good traveling companion."

"You said you wouldn't be a good dinner companion."

With half a nod, she acknowledged the implied compliment.

"Look, Eleanor," he hadn't said her name much and, liking it, he said it again, "Eleanor, if you're wondering *why* I want you to come, don't ask me, because I don't know. There aren't any specific reasons, like—like voting for mayor or something. I just would like you along." Now that he had

taken the plunge, his fright began to fade and he wished that she would accept.

"It's nice of you. It really is. Very nice. But—I can't do it."

He felt that, tacitly, without any overt sign or coyness, she was asking him to continue, to convince her, as if she wanted to be forced to go.

"You'll be missing an interesting trip. Beautiful ride, Teodoro says. And a chance to meet your girlhood hero."

She smiled a little and stared at her water glass. "That's not . . . I . . . I . . . really . . ."

"Well?" he insisted. "What, really?"

She didn't answer.

. . . Seastrom, she thought, Earl Seastrom. . . . "Fearless Earl," the song had called him. Maybe it would do her good (if anything could do her good) to meet a man whose life had been built around the central fact of courage. Indeed, there *might* be some good in it, for the mere possibility of meeting him had somewhat dimmed the panic she would otherwise have felt at Roy's invitation. Maybe if she could meet Seastrom—not, of course, that there was anything that he could say or do—but maybe just seeing him, talking to him . . .

What nonsense. Utter stupid nonsense. That was the level to which she had been reduced, hoping for petty miracles, black magic, believing that a latter-day laying on of hands would put form into chaos, iron into quicksand. . . . As if merely by meeting a man (probably a fool) who had once flown a plane . . .

Still, granted that it was all nonsense, if she went, it would be two days less.

Two days less to live. Two days less to be damned in, to writhe through. She would at least be rid of two long days of a life fiendishly articulated into hours and minutes. This

trip would be a sop, small but real, to the jaws that snapped at her heels. . . .

(And somewhere under the freight of fifteen years there was the child with the flag in front of the lion, glimpsing the hero for half a second.)

She looked back at Roy, turning from nothing, nowhere, to this perfect restaurant and his patient, hopeful face. "All right. If I'm really invited, I'll go. It might be—diverting."

In a moment he replied, "Sure. That's right. Swell. I'm very glad."

Roy had taken a moment to reply because he was surprised. Not at her decision but at her reason; for he, too, had welcomed this trip as a diversion. For the past few days he had been faced with the necessity of making a decision and, almost for the first time in his life, a decision that was thoroughly uncomfortable. One of the reasons he had come to Mexico for his vacation—the chief reason he had come so far from Hollywood—was that he wanted as much physical perspective as possible, in the perhaps childish hope that it would help his mental perspective.

Although he had been gone from New York for two years, Roy was luminously remembered in editorial circles there as a wonder boy who had risen meteorically by virtue of exceptional intelligence, diversity of knowledge, and protean taste. He was the kind of reader who could skim a manuscript in an hour and recall five years later whether the heroine had been blonde or near-blonde; he had the kind of mind that always knew at least a little about any subject under discussion; and he had the kind of literary sense that reveled in the rarer altitudes but was not too rarefied to understand, if it did not always enjoy, the qualities that ensured popularity.

So when an old friend of his formed a book-publishing

partnership with a young millionaire, the first person he thought of as his editor was Roy. He had written Roy a long letter, outlining the prospects and prospectus of the new firm and offering him a job at a specified salary. The firm's plans might have been Roy's private dream of what publishing ought to be; it was the kind of job he had always wanted and had never seriously believed he would get, indeed had never seriously believed would exist. But it paid one-third of his present salary.

His friend had to have an answer in two weeks and, since Roy was due for a three-week vacation, he decided to go as far away as possible to think about it. He'd always wanted to visit Mexico anyway (Mexico, not Tijuana); and now he especially wanted to put distance between himself and the whole smell of luxury and roll-collared shirts and thick-framed sunglasses and hyper-Broadway slang that were Hollywood, in order to give himself a fairer chance.

Since his arrival in Mexico, he had spent approximately twenty minutes thinking about the matter. Fifteen of those minutes had been concerned with the wonder and satisfaction of doing something solid again: producing books, some of which would outlast their year of birth; perhaps occasionally contributing permanently to culture; working with people who, though they were interested in profits (Heaven knew), nevertheless had clear ideas about the ways in which they were willing to earn them.

In the remaining five minutes he had thought about the present almost palpable pleasure of getting a check for five hundred dollars every week; the easy, out-of-door opulence, the year-round summer-resort feeling of the life; the long-legged girls who, even when they came from Kansas, soon acquired the California patina; and the fact that here he worked among people to most of whom he was superior. At Peerless he crested his associates easily; in New York he would be more or less among equals, he would have to labor

to keep abreast. It would be more stimulating, perhaps, but less comfortable and flattering.

He thought finally of breakfast on his terrace in the sun, at least two hundred and fifty mornings a year.

Then he stopped thinking; because he was frightened of reaching a decision either way. And because he had the growing feeling that he was something of a renegade for not having decided on the New York job at once. But principally because he didn't want to decide against the New York job before he'd used this occasion to exercise his ideals a little further. Another opportunity for idealistic exercise of this kind might not arise for a long time.

This trip to Patzcuaro would give him two days in which to postpone the decision. And as he smoked his last cigarette that night he began to feel more pleasure than regret at the fact that he had invited Eleanor. Something about the girl was deeply touching; and he liked to be touched in that particular way, a semipaternal, anachronistic cavalier way. Besides, the girl was unusually lovely in a manner quite different from the dentally and pectorally perfect movie beauties.

And he would always rather be with a lovely girl than without one.

He thought, yawning, that he and she and Teodoro the Unique might have an interesting little trip; and went to bed.

They started on the dot of nine the next morning. Roy had phoned Teodoro from the restaurant as soon as Eleanor had agreed to come so that the driver could wire ahead for another room. Now they were able to start punctually only because Teodoro had arrived at the hotel a few minutes early; so Roy knew, if he had not already guessed, that Teodoro liked them. Roy said to him, "Good God, if you'd

got here on time, it would have been enough of a surprise. How'd you manage to get here early?"

Teodora grinned. "You right. My wife says when she sees me leave, 'Teodoro, I bet you got a date with a pretty girl.'" He pronounced "says" exactly as spelled, with a long vowel. "She says, 'You don't never get up this early just for business.'" He beamed the grin around to Eleanor. He didn't know her well enough to finish the remark by commenting that his wife had been right; he simply grinned for a moment more and said, "Well, let's go, ha?"

Roy saw that there was a nice point to be settled even before they started: how they were to sit. If he and Eleanor sat in the back, that would tacitly relegate Teodoro to the position of chauffeur. So, with Eleanor's permission, he sat next to her in the wide front seat.

As they sped along the Paseo de la Reforma past the high-pillared Angel of Independence, Eleanor, between the two men, felt the faint stirrings of old, time-buried security and pleasure. But these feelings, recurring now striped with the shadows of the present, were like a prospect of beauty seen through a barred window.

Well, enough of that, she thought. No more searching and probing about why I'm here, why I came. I'll simply sit here and let the motor and the tan hands on the wheel take me where they like. I said yes, I would come, I slept on it and lay awake on it, and today I came. There is at least as much reason for my being here with these men as for being anywhere. . . .

. . . I feel as if I had been split, sundered into parts. Part of me dead with Ralph, part back in that hotel room, part here in this car; but inside, deepest, at the source of the inquiring, where once I could admire the plumage of my soul, there is nothing, nothing at all. The sundering has drained me, left me dry, an echoing hollow. And that hollow

might as well be with the "me" that is in this car as anywhere else.

. . . I'll look at something along the road, see something, say something—anything to wrench my thoughts outward.

"Are those hawks?" she asked, looking up.

"Buzzards," said Teodoro.

The ride to Toluca was lovelier this time because it had the added merit of some familiarity. Past Toluca, they started to climb into mountains as high-beckoning as any Eleanor had ever seen, with sudden huge soundless valleys off to one side or the other. They paused briefly at the View of a Thousand Peaks, where there were no peaks at all but a vast unfolding of range after range of wooded mountains, like veils stripped successively from infinity until you felt that great secrets lay just over the horizon.

"No use," smiled Roy. "Can't see past the last one."

"Oh," said Eleanor, "was it on my face?"

"Sure. Lots of things are on your face all the time. That's what makes it an interesting-type face to watch. . . . For instance, ever since we left town, you've looked as if you were climbing out of a well. Not anywhere near out yet by a long shot. But climbing."

Teodoro, waiting for them in the car, said, "Well, we gotta keep moving we're gonna make Patzcuaro before dark. Vamonos!"

She grew a little sleepy in the middle-afternoon and Teodoro suggested that she get in the back and stretch out. She lay there for a while listening to the motor and the occasional comments in the front seat (oceans distant in her drowsy mind though within arm's length), feeling the car lean from side to side and point up the road and breast down again; and she wished desperately that she were nothing, neutral, so that she might have a chance to begin again,

to make a happiness for herself. And then she wondered how she dared even to contemplate happiness when she was as sterile to conceive it as if there were an organ for it which had been extirpated from her body. How could her stubborn senses still perceive pleasure in the world as if they were not part of her, not part of the death that died again with every wink of memory?

Ralph, she thought, and had to open her eyes.

Roy, in front, had turned and was looking at her. "O.K.?" he asked.

She looked at him briefly, wondering who he was (brushing aside the first answers provided by her mind), then nodded a reply, closed her eyes again and forgot him.

In a few minutes Roy said softly, "Are you asleep?" There was no answer.

"Nice girl, ha?" said Teodoro. He was watching the road but he knew where Roy was looking.

"Yep," sighed Roy. "Damnedest thing. That girl looks the way old music sounds."

"Nice girl anyway," said Teodoro.

Asleep, she seemed to Roy safe but unhappy, like a prisoner returned to her cell. He stared at her until he had to squint, as if merely by staring he hoped to see into her mind.

"Teodoro," he said, "I'm just beginning to be a hundred per cent glad that she came with us."

Teodoro glanced at him, then—in the rear-vision mirror—at Eleanor. "Sure, you're glad. Nice girl. Asleep, ha?"

CHAPTER THREE

. . . *W*hen Eleanor and Ralph met for the first time, they thought exactly opposite things about each other, although of course they didn't find this out until much later.

What a sad face, she thought, but what pleasantness behind it.

What a pleasant face, thought Ralph, but touched with sadness. Almost as if she used melancholy as a scent.

Strictly speaking, it was not the first time they had met. Ralph Digby had built his house in the hills outside New Gilead twenty years before; and the Shafer family had lived in New Gilead before the town itself actually existed. But the last time he remembered meeting Justice Shafer's daughter she had been a slim, black-haired child of shy fourteen; and, for her part, Eleanor remembered the famous Mr. Digby as an ancient. Now that she was ten years older, he seemed younger, closer, a friend even before the introductions were finished.

Eleanor told him how much she admired his work and how glad she was that he was going to select the architect for her father's memorial.

"I wish I hadn't been made the judge," he replied. "I'd like to have submitted a design of my own for that memorial. I was a great admirer of your father."

Justice Shafer had been dead a little over a year and the town, which needed a new hall anyway, had decided to erect a civic center in his honor: a combination of town offices, courthouse, council rooms, and municipal auditorium. The Wendell Shafer Memorial Center. There was to be a competition for the designing job, open to any Connecticut architect; the judge was Ralph Digby, himself a world-renowned architect and art critic and a resident of New Gilead. The Town Commission would award a fat contract to the man he chose.

No monument could have made Eleanor happier than the town's decision to honor her father thus, because she knew how much he had loved New Gilead. No matter where they had been obliged to live because of his work—Hartford, New York, Washington—New Gilead had always been their home. Here her forty-year-old father had brought his twenty-year-old bride; here Eleanor had been born, in the house in which she now lived; here the ashes of the bride and (later) the groom were buried.

Every time they had left—no matter how long they had stayed away—it had seemed an expedition from this tiny town: the trips abroad, the years in Washington, the years in school and college. The knowledge that the town was there—her father's town, waiting to be returned to—had made her a citizen, given her a nativity; a harbor from which she could voyage confidently because she knew she had a safe place to which to come back.

Everything about the town was bound up with her father; in the course of years, they had walked every street many times, stopped in every shop, climbed every hill. Words he had spoken haunted this or that lane, troubles he had cleared, strength he had given. Laughter he had evoked.

Her whole light-footed, happy and discovering youth was bound up with this town and with that townsman.

So, even if nothing else had militated in Mr. Digby's favor, Eleanor would have liked him because he was closely associated with the town's plan to honor her father. Soon after their first meeting, or remeeting, in gratitude for his serving as judge of the contest, she invited him to dinner with herself and her Aunt Julia, whom he had long ago captivated. She also, of course, invited Mrs. Digby, but Ralph said that his wife was out of town and would be unable to come. They were not often seen together.

After dinner, Eleanor showed him around the house, the spiral staircase, her mother's old sewing room (untouched since her death), the library, with the portrait over the mantel of her father in his Supreme Court robes.

"The Man of the Renaissance," said Ralph, looking up at the portrait. "The last one, perhaps. Soldier, lover, philosopher, jurist. I suppose he could compose verses while he dueled."

"I don't know about that," she laughed. "But when I went to tell him that he'd won the Nobel peace prize, I found him pitching a soft-ball game over at the Oval."

"Precisely," Ralph nodded.

Later he asked her whether she did anything. "Oh, yes, I teach. English. Not what you might think of as English courses, perhaps, but they're in that department. They're really seminars. In poetry."

"I see. Where do you give these courses?"

"Well, for the past two years I've been teaching at a school near New York. But next October I'm going to start at the Andrews School." Miss Andrews's was just outside New Gilead; very old, very good.

"Oh, fine."

She debated a moment, not wanting to brag childishly,

yet for some reason not wanting him to think her exclusively a teacher. "I write too," she said. "Poetry, mostly."

He struck the arm of his chair. "Of course! How stupid of me. I remember something in the *New Gilead Chronicle* about a book of yours."

"That's right." Well, why not? "As a matter of fact, I've done two books."

He laughed. She looked up at him, curiously. "As a matter of fact," he chuckled. "As a matter of fact, indeed."

He borrowed copies of her books that night and wrote next day to say that he wasn't going to return them. It was the nicest compliment, she thought.

The following week he invited her to his house to autograph her books and to have tea with him. He didn't drink anything stronger because of his heart and, although he offered her a cocktail, she felt it would be ostentatious to insist on one. Besides, she enjoyed the tea. Then, a few days later, when she was going to be in New York anyway, they met to see a matinee; then to hear a recital; then to visit a museum. And there were other occasions. She even met his wife once.

During all this she was amazed by the rapidity with which Ralph changed in her eyes: as if he were being transmuted out of the character for which she had first cast him into and through a succession of other characters. When she first met him, he was a highly interesting, sensitive, unpretentious great man, more than twenty years older than herself, who reminded her slightly of her father. By their third meeting he had become a dear, intuitively understanding friend who happened, merely incidentally, to be considerably older. By their fifth meeting he was a man, intimate, knitted into her life on levels of her own, and it was only by concentrating consciously on the fact of his age that she remembered he was older.

. . . And that he was married. His wife seemed as

minor a part of his life as she (she found herself hoping with surprising vehemence) was a major part. The wife existed, but she wasn't real. Like many actual things in Eleanor's life, the wife was shadowed over because the light of her own interest and desire was focused elsewhere.

Most relationships between men and women start on a superficial, merely pleasant level and then, if they are to ripen at all, subsequently sink roots into the richer veins of their lives. But the reverse was true of Ralph and her. Almost immediately that they knew each other, it seemed to her they fused on deep matters; they seemed always to have been of the same mind and sympathy. Later, as they knew each other better, they began also to have a less serious kind of fun together, like an external seal on something already secretly bonded. It ranged from laughter at Walton's "Façade" at a concert to the childish, almost idiotic pleasure of roasting chestnuts with him in his fireplace; to the discovery, sitting in his house one day, that she had a fine time simply being in his company.

Soon she allowed herself to realize what she had been somehow attempting to suppress: that she was in love with him. And she wondered how she had allowed herself to get into this predicament. . . . Her old weakness of trying to abolish difficulty merely by shutting her eyes to it. (How often her father had told her!) And here she was in love with a married man. A much older married man. But in love. In genuine, rock-deep, cognizant love.

She knew (she hoped she knew) that he loved her. But she wondered whether he would ever say so; and if he said so, she wondered what she would do.

He told her one night at his house. It was a chilly June evening—they were sitting on the low sofa before a blaze in the huge fireplace. His wife was away, as usual, staying with friends.

And after he told her, Eleanor said that she had known it for some time.

"You knew," he said. "You knew and yet you let me keep on seeing you." There was an earth-circling second of silence in the room. "Then you feel the same way?"

She nodded slowly, nearly ill with fright. She had never dreamed that it could be so completely terrifying to tell someone you were in love with him. Then she turned to him and saw him and was less frightened. "I love you very much, Ralph."

"Very dearest," he said soon, "I never expected it. To be happy again."

He kissed her palm gently. In the firelight, the thin triangular face with the gray temples seemed nearly translucent; the flames that beat up from the hearth seemed to burn inside his frail body. She leaned forward and lifted his face with her other hand, and they kissed.

Kissing him, she didn't think about his wife. Feelings before facts, or, at least, one kind of fact before another. But after they had kissed, Eleanor thought of her, and knew that he was thinking of her too. However, they didn't talk about her. There was absolutely nothing to say.

Eleanor had asked questions here and there, and Ralph had let fall an occasional word (but only rarely—he didn't pity himself); and from these scraps, together with her one meeting with the woman, she had pieced together a picture of two people who had drifted far apart. According to old Mrs. Clandon, who lived next door to the Shafers and who was a reliable source of information in such matters, the only reason they hadn't been divorced was that Mrs. Digby didn't mean to lose the prestige of being the wife of the greatest man in his profession.

So Eleanor knew, as she had known all along, that she could love him under the conditions that existed or not love him.

She would have liked to ask Aunt Julia for advice; she could talk to her father's sister almost as frankly as she used to talk to her father. But she was afraid that Aunt Julia would counsel her to stop seeing Ralph. And disconsolate as she was about the environment of their love, she couldn't face the prospect of losing it entirely. For in addition to her love for Ralph—love that included admiration close to the point of worship—she felt a kind of honored obligation. She knew that he had little joy in life and not much life left even for that joy. Therefore, before her affection was stultified by fear or corrupted by pity, she made up her mind. It was a week after that firelight conversation that they became lovers.

In most ways it was a wonderful summer. About once a week Ralph would dismiss his cook and houseboy for the evening (his wife was away almost continuously) and Eleanor would drive the roundabout route to the dirt road that curved up through the woods to his house. There they were isolated for some hours, without even a telephone to intrude. And there, during those times, she felt that she could touch his spirit, the innermost man, the inhabiting beauty that had made him great. This, to her, was sufficient compensation for the impermanence and near-futility of their relationship.

To Ralph, her love was an unexpected bounty, a gift that he had not looked for before going. Scruples didn't enter into the matter for him, at least not usual ones. He would certainly have scrupled at a mere "affair," as being essentially undignified and a waste of time; equally, he felt that to deny themselves their love would have been unscrupulous and wasteful. Before she had come, death—without frightening him—had haunted him. Now her tenderness, her warm, oddly grave affection gave sustenance to him,

and if it could not obliterate his ills, at least it helped marvelously to mitigate them.

He asked her once (the question was inevitable even at his age) whether she had ever been in love before. When she said "yes," Ralph was curious about the man. "I don't mean his name," he said. "That doesn't matter. What kind of person was he?"

"Entirely unlike you, except that, like you, he was a poet. Jack. He was redheaded and impulsive and Irish. And he was also argumentative and tender and imaginative and kind. Sometimes he made me very angry; and then he made me laugh. You never make me angry."

"But then," said Ralph, "I hardly ever make you laugh."

Later, she continued: "Jack used to say I was a coward. There were so many things he wanted to hurry off and do, things I couldn't quite see. We were in college together and he wanted to get married then. I didn't think I was a coward, I just said we ought to wait a bit, to give him a chance. A chance he hadn't asked for. Well, he got a job as soon as he graduated," she said. "He was an engineer. And he was killed in an accident six weeks later." She added, "Just as I was supposed to go out West and marry him."

"I see," he said quietly and touched her face. "Now I understand some things about you. How long ago was that?"

"Three years." The sound of the words came back to her after she had uttered them. "Good Lord. That *live* boy. Dead three years."

Sometimes Ralph would show her some of the designs for her father's memorial, designs which were being submitted from all over the state, explaining to her what was aesthetically unsound in this one and why another was impractical. The competition was to close on September first and he had to announce his choice two weeks later. "I hope,"

he said, "that Designs To Come are better than Designs On Hand."

Thus the summer ran, illuminated, enclosed, crystalline, protected by a tacit agreement between them that the world and time did not exist. And so the first strong invasion of the world into their private sphere was all the more distasteful.

She was in a drugstore in New Gilead with her aunt one day when Ralph happened to walk in. He didn't often come into town, particularly in the warm weather; she hadn't met him this way all summer. She almost said, "Hello, Ralph," and probably would have done so if he had not seen it coming and prevented it with "Good morning, Miss Shafer." "Good morning, Mr. Digby," she replied.

It occurred to Eleanor, rather sadly, as she watched him talking to her dear lame aunt with the thick knobbed cane, that she would never be able to tell Aunt Julia about Ralph, that they could never all three of them really be together.

Once the breach had been made in their seclusion, it seemed as if misfortune meant to exploit it. The next time she drove up to visit him, as arranged, she was surprised to see the houseboy open the door; and she was afraid that her surprise was evident. "Oh—is Mr. Digby at home?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, but he's not very well today. Doctor just left."

". . . Is it anything serious?"

"Well, he's had a bad day, ma'am. Came on him quick. But the doctor left him feeling pretty comfortable."

"Oh. I'm glad to hear that. Tell him—just tell him that Miss Shafer dropped by to—to ask him a question. Nothing important. Give him my best."

And when she drove up the following week she was almost recognized just before she turned off the highway onto Ralph's private road. Mrs. Clandon's nephew drove past

as Eleanor slowed down for the turn; it was only by pulling over to the side quickly and switching off her lights that she avoided being seen.

The following week his wife was at home; so Ralph and Eleanor met in New York and had dinner at an out-of-the-way restaurant in the Village. By that time her uneasiness had had time to grow to despair; by that time the screen had been irreplaceably ripped from the world that had always been lying in wait outside the pavilion of their encounter.

She told him how she felt: of the constraint and shock in the drugstore, the furtive cheapness in his doorway when faced by his servant. He listened intently, his face even paler than usual; and when she had finished, all he could do was agree. There was nothing to reply (he replied) in contradiction. It was a completely horrible situation.

"Ralph," she said, putting her hand on his arm, "Ralph dear—"

"You don't need to say it," he nodded. "I've known that this moment was coming. I knew it had to come. I knew that just as surely as people exist around us their shadows would fall on us. You knew it too."

"Yes," she said, "but I didn't know what it would feel like. Ralph," she said, "I love you. Whatever happens, I'll never regret anything. Oh, regret is a stupid word," she went on, "I'll always rejoice in it. . . . But—but—"

He lifted his eyes. "But now the future's caught up with you."

She didn't want to hurt him by affirming that; she simply returned his look.

In a moment, he shook his head. "No. I won't say what I was about to say. I was going to tell you that if I were free or if my wife would divorce me, I'd marry you. But I don't honestly think I would, Eleanor. I don't think I could allow you to marry an old man. An old invalid."

She didn't reply and he was sorry he had said it.

"Besides," he added after a pause, "I know my wife. She won't do it."

"But if she would, Ralph—"

He studied her face, and she couldn't help noticing something of the father in the lover's look but she didn't dislike him for it. "Dearest," he said, "I never dreamed of marrying you. I never thought you'd want to."

"I'd marry you, Ralph."

"You've thought about it?"

"I've thought about it." She would never have been able to make such a critical decision if it had meant cutting herself off from him and standing alone; but since this decision, frightening though it was, meant that he would be with her, next to her for support, she had been able to resolve her mind. "I'd marry you."

After the waiter had come and gone, he said, "There'd be a lot of trouble. She'd see to that. She'd do her best to drag somebody else into it; she'd look for someone to drag. We'd have to be especially careful."

"Yes, but the only really important matter is how you would bear up under it. Would the whole thing be too much of a strain for you?"

He shrugged. "Not if I refused to let it upset me. And no matter what happened, I wouldn't let it do that. I'd know what to expect, and I think I could stand up under it. . . . It's just that I'm not at all convinced it's a wise thing for you, marrying me."

"I'm not sure either that it would be wise. I know it would be wonderful."

He took her hand. "Eleanor, I think we love each other as much as two people of our respective ages and prospects possibly could. But I know that in every way I'd be the chief gainer if we married." She attempted to speak. "In every way," he repeated. "But selfishly I'd be very happy to be the gainer—if only I felt sure that *you* were sure of what you're

doing." She attempted to speak again, again he continued. "If I were able I'd go away for a while: to give you a chance to think about it without distraction. But I can't leave till after the memorial contest closes and not for some time after. So this is what I suggest, dearest. I think you ought to go away. At least for a month. Then, when you come back, if you still say 'yes,' I'll take steps to get a divorce."

She left her hand in his, a token of her intent. "All right, Ralph. I don't want you to have any more doubt than I have. And if you'll feel easier to know that I've thought it over 'without distraction,' I'll go away for a while. As a matter of fact, I had intended to go to Mexico this summer anyway . . . before I met you. Perhaps I'll fly down for a month."

"Fine. But promise you won't stay away longer than a month, whatever you decide."

"I won't. I certainly won't. And I can come to see you once or twice before I go," she asked almost pleadingly, "mayn't I?"

He tried to speak. He turned his head away, and when he looked back, he was just able to say, "Please. Don't make me behave foolishly. In public."

Within a week she had secured plane space and a tourist card and a hotel reservation in Mexico City. Aunt Julia thought the trip a very good idea; Eleanor hadn't been anywhere for a long time and she would come back refreshed for her new job. Eleanor wished only that she could have told her aunt the truth and taken strength and will from her. How she admired her vigorous, forthright aunt, the woman who had gone through four leg operations in one year and during the whole siege had directed the Connecticut Guild of Women Voters without flurry or upset. ("If only those doctors would stop waiting for me to have a nervous breakdown and get *on* with things," Aunt Julia had

said.) But there was no way to communicate with her aunt in this matter; there was more than shyness to prevent it.

Eleanor was to leave on a Monday; she drove up to see Ralph on the preceding Friday night. She left her aunt chatting with some visitors. She said she had some errands to do and that she'd be back late, not to wait up.

That night it was as if everything had conspired to make their farewell poignant and delighting. There was a resounding sky of stars; there was a cool breeze, there were flower scents. And to crown the occasion, Ralph had at last found a design he thought worthy of the award.

He showed it to her as they sat on the low sofa where they had first acknowledged love. It was sometime after ten o'clock, and they were relaxing before the fire in dressing gowns.

"I've never heard of the man before," Ralph said, unrolling the plan. It had come from a young architect in Hartford, a man named Harry Norris. "But I know him as well as if I'd raised him. I knew him as soon as I looked at this. Here is a work of art."

While he was indicating to her the gifted touches in the work, they heard the heralding whine of a motor from the bottom of the hill. They looked at each other swiftly. His wife was in Boston, he knew, and that wasn't the sound of his cook's car.

In reply to her glance, he said, "I haven't the vaguest idea. Did you put your roadster away?"

"Yes, and shut the garage door."

"Good. Dearest—I hate this—but I think perhaps you'd better go upstairs until I get rid of whoever it is." She nodded. He took her hand. "I hate this. This French farce touch. I'm very sorry."

She touched his mouth with her finger. "Don't fret about it. No one's fault. It's just—unfortunate."

From the darkened window above, she saw a large car

stop. A heavy-set man got out whom she recognized at once: Henry Van Nuys, the real estate man and one of the town commissioners. He was short and square and had a jowled face with thick iron-gray hair combed straight back. Eleanor always thought of him as the man with the small bloodshot eyes.

Now, as he went into the house, she remembered that Ralph had mentioned something to her about Van Nuys's inordinate interest in the Memorial Award. Ralph had said the man had dropped by several times to ask how the contest was going. Ralph had discouraged the inquiries both because he felt it was none of the commissioner's business as yet and because he simply didn't care much for the man.

And here was Van Nuys again.

She couldn't hear the beginning of their conversation downstairs, but they soon moved from the porch into the living room. And in a few pointed sentences from Van Nuys, the whole purpose of his visit was made clear. The competition was practically closed; in two weeks Ralph was to make his announcement. Van Nuys was glad to see that Ralph was alone tonight because he had some confidential business to discuss. Bluntly, he suggested that Ralph award the prize to a man named Bernard Hayes.

Ralph said coolly, "You have your reasons for making this suggestion, no doubt."

Van Nuys replied, equally coolly. "Sure I have, Mr. Digby. And I can give *you* some reasons too."

"Van Nuys—" Eleanor heard Ralph getting angry—"since you've taken the trouble to come all the way up here tonight, I don't mind telling you that I've already made up my mind about the award. And it won't go to Hayes."

"Now, Mr. Digby," said the cool visitor, "don't go getting sore at Hayes just because I put in a word for him."

"I'm not that shortsighted," Ralph replied sharply. "If I liked Hayes's work, even your recommendation couldn't

discourage me. The gentleman, however, is merely a competent hack."

"But he *is* competent."

"Just."

"Then what's the harm?" Van Nuys said smoothly. "Why not give it to him?"

"Look here—"

"Now wait a minute, Mr. Digby." Eleanor heard the cynical honesty in the voice, as if frankness and sheer laying of cards on the table justified anything under the sun. "I've been trying to talk to you for weeks, that's why I've been dropping by, but I've never been able to find you alone. I've got a clear-cut proposition to offer you—take it or leave it. It's nothing silly, like because he's a relative of mine—he isn't—or that there's a few dollars in it. It's a big thing, Mr. Digby. Hayes is rich. He doesn't want the award money, he wants the prestige. The entire fee that was paid to him could find its cute little way right back to you and me."

At first Eleanor was afraid that they were fighting—she thought that Ralph had hit him and that Van Nuys had struck back. There was the sound of a chair falling over and of scuffling. But then over the scuffling and Ralph's angry voice telling him to get out, she heard Van Nuys asking him to calm down and be reasonable. Ralph, fairly shouting now, said that if he didn't clear out at once he'd cite him to the Commission for attempted bribery. Then Van Nuys reminded him heatedly that there was over forty thousand dollars involved and not to be a damned fool, to think it over.

"Think it over!" Ralph replied furiously. "Look here, you. I'll tell you something straight, just so you'll understand how much thinking over I'm going to do. I'm not scheduled to announce it for two weeks—and nobody else knows yet because I decided only today—but I shall write to the Commission the very first thing in the morning; to inform them

that my choice is Harry Norris of Hartford. That's how much 'thinking over' I'm going to do. Now good night, Mr. Van Nuys, and get the hell out!"

Whereupon Van Nuys again called him a fool and Ralph slammed the door. The commissioner got into his car and drove down the hill.

Eleanor came downstairs and found Ralph still standing by the door, leaning against it and breathing hard. His face was drawn, his eyes shone, and his lips were almost white. His right arm was across his chest; he clutched his left arm.

She went to him quickly. "Ralph, dear—"

He shook his head, as if to shed revulsion. "Did you hear that man?" His voice was breathy, strained. "Did you ever hear such simon-pure—" He smiled in amazement. "I shouldn't have let myself get so angry. Ought to have laughed at him. But so brassy. . . . So much other excitement today . . . your leaving . . . finding my young man. . . . All keyed up, I guess." He winced slightly, then another smile. "Damned fool. Me, I mean. Outraged virtue."

"Come sit down," she said gently, taking his arm. "I'll get you something."

"No, it's all right. I'll get it myself. So many medicines you wouldn't find it. Have to mix it myself, anyway." He winced again. "Left arm hurts too. Bad sign."

"Are you sure you don't want me to—"

"Yes. I'll be all right." Before he went into the bedroom, he said, "Sorry to be such a nuisance."

She didn't insist on going with him because she knew he was embarrassed by the intrusion of his illness in her company. He disliked to make her conscious of it; it was like displaying an ugly defect. She knew he would hate it if she insisted on mixing and dissolving the powders and feeding him the medicine like a child. So she waited for him in the living room.

She passed the time looking again at Norris's design.

She read the penciled lettering on the lintel. "Wendell Shafer Memorial Center." It really *was* beautiful.

Almost ten minutes passed before she noticed that Ralph hadn't returned. She knocked on the bedroom door. There was no reply. She turned the knob quickly, crossed the threshold and then stopped short, stunned.

Ralph lay across the bed, his mouth open, his hands contorted and still, his eyes closed.

She went to him as soon as she could move. "Ralph," she whispered, as if he were asleep and paradoxically she didn't want to wake him. "Ralph, darling!" She touched his hand; it was moist and alien.

Then, without really meaning to, she flung back from the bed in fear—fear for him and the older forest fear of impending death. In a moment she recovered herself. She ran into the bathroom where she quickly found the smelling salts. She hurried back and held them under his nose. Not the faintest stirring. Not a movement.

"Ralph!" she pleaded. "Ralph!"

She needed help. But there was no telephone. She must get her car, she thought, and drive to the nearest house . . .

. . . And suddenly an old dread shot into her mind—rooted her to the spot for a moment that seemed endless.

She couldn't go for help. She couldn't telephone, even if there had been a phone. She was trapped; powerless; immured about with an impassable wall. She couldn't in any way reveal her presence here.

It was an old nightmare that had troubled her often: that sometime he would be ill when they were apart and she couldn't go to him—or worse, and now pitilessly true, that he would be ill sometime when they were together and she couldn't summon help.

Caught. In a hideous sticky snare of convention.

It wasn't her own safety that worried her. For his sake—for his sake she couldn't let anyone know she had been

here. No matter how plausible an excuse she invented, tongues would wag. She had been here alone with him late at night when his wife and servants were away. . . . Oh, the old nightmare, devilish and complete. And with an added barb: Van Nuys, in the mere logic of events, could testify that she had hidden during his visit.

"Ralph," she implored, nearly weeping, frantic with impotence. There he lay, and there was nothing she could do while he was perhaps dying—

Dying?

Horror wrenched through her in a sickening flash. She swayed where she stood. Her stomach convulsed and her throat dried raw.

The caul of shock broke, the birth waters of harsh fact swirled around her. She grasped his wrist, she slipped her other hand inside his robe and spread it on his smooth, now strange breast. "Ralph," she begged, "Ralph . . . please . . . don't be dead. . . ."

One minute. Two minutes. Five minutes. Nothing. No beat. No sign that the receding man would ever be hers, the world's, again. But she had known it was true the moment the thought had struck her.

She collapsed on the bed next to him, weeping. Uncontrolled, overpowering. Her shoulders shook and her voice struggled through sobs to supplicate him. She seized his hand—the fingers stiffly twisted and now perceptibly cold—and kissed it feverishly. "Ralph. Darling. Oh, Ralph . . ."

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the weeping ceased; and she lay silent there next to him for a long time, feeling the tears dry on her cheeks and around her eyes. She looked at him, lying dead beside her, and thought that nothing would ever again be secure for her; there would never be anything of which she could say: "It is there and beautiful and it will be there still."

She said his name again softly; then she got up and forced herself to think.

She realized now that, just as she had been powerless to summon help, she was equally powerless to tell anyone what had happened. The only thing she could do—the only thing she could possibly do—was to pick up her belongings, and walk out coldly and leave him there. This man, to be left like a sack of potatoes in a cellar; alone, unattended.

“Ralph, you see, you understand,” she said to the dead man. “There’s nothing else. There’s nothing else you would want me to do. To stay—to call someone—anyone—would only give people in the town a chance to throw mud. On your name. And my father’s name too, the name you wanted to help preserve. You see that, don’t you, Ralph? Oh, dearest, don’t you?”

She knew that his servants would arrive early in the morning—in about six hours. She had a fleeting vision of the scene of discovery. And then she saw it over again, as it would be if she or anything of hers were found here. And she saw what would ensue: the snide remarks, the half-covered smirks, the innuendoes and sneers. No, she owed him this protection: the illustrious man alive had still to be illustrious and esteemed to his grave. A man’s reputation at his time of death was what endured after him; he couldn’t amend it then, as he could during his life.

Quickly she dressed and picked up her bag and coat. She kissed his cheek—a man’s cheek a few hours ago, now remote, marble, memorial. She looked at him a lingering moment in which wordless things were chanted in her heart: the things that those who knew them for each other can never utter. Then adieu. Brief farewell; prelude to long sorrow.

She left the light on in the bedroom since he couldn’t have turned it off himself. She closed the door behind her,

got her roadster out of the garage and drove down the mountain and the roundabout route to home.

No one saw her; yet she felt as if, spider-like, she were unreeling a thread behind her that bound her irrevocably to the death-inhabited house on the hill.

She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep, and she didn't dare lie awake. She took a double dose of nembutal and lay in bed impatiently—blankly as she could—waiting for it to work. At last the bed contracted, tilted, plunged into the sounding dark.

In the morning there was no period of suspense, no dangling by that thread which bound her to the other house. She had barely opened her eyes, surmised that it was noon and reconciled herself to the fact that what had happened was not a dream, when Aunt Julia knocked softly and entered.

Her limping, vigorous old aunt had an unusual tenderness about her this morning. There was always a tenderness in Aunt Julia, but usually it lay beneath the surface. This morning it was as if she carried it in her hands and offered it to Eleanor.

"Darling," she said in that voice which, though loud, seemed intimate, "I have very bad news."

Now the actress, the performance. "What is it, Aunt Julia?"

"Ralph Digby is dead. I heard it from Mrs. Clandon and I phoned the *Chronicle* to confirm it. It's true, unfortunately."

According to plan. "How horrible. How horrible."

"Yes. Died only this morning."

"What?" Mistake here. *Must* be a mistake. . . . A voice whispered caution, be careful. "This morning?"

Mistake. Must be.

"Yes," Aunt Julia continued, "his cook found him unconscious when she arrived this morning. She got Dr. Car-

roll right away and he gave him a hypodermic. But it was too late."

"You mean," asked Eleanor carefully—oh, carefully, "you mean he—he was dead before the doctor came?"

"No, the doctor said he was still alive. Barely alive. Comatose. Carroll said if he'd been called four or five hours earlier he could have saved him." She shook her head. "If only someone had been there to go for the doctor. If only he'd had a telephone. A man with that kind of heart ought never to have been left alone. He'd be alive now. Great tragedy."

Eleanor nodded slowly, and continued nodding, slowly at first but felt the motion quicken up and down, then from side to side, until at last her head swung far, far off into jagged blackness. . . .

The next twenty-four hours were such that she would quite literally rather have died than live through them again. And all under the strangling horror of that time, while she beat wildly to reach a shore of some sanity, under it all droned three repeating phrases, persistent, unequivocal, as if played by a bow across her bosom; he is dead; he could still be alive; I'm to blame. . . . I made excuses, pretending to think of him and my father. And now he is dead and there is nothing I can do.

For surely the height of futility would be to reveal now her presence at his house. The moment had passed; she had faltered and rationalized and whimpered, and he was dead.

Aunt Julia wasn't unduly surprised at Eleanor's reaction to the news. She knew that Eleanor had thought highly of Mr. Digby and she knew also that her niece had mysteries in her, hidden depths and pools. One never knew when a fact dropped in might echo and echo for days. Some things which she had feared might affect Eleanor profoundly had

been assimilated quickly and accepted; and then this Digby tragedy, to which she hadn't expected so intense a reaction, shook her niece severely. Well, that was Eleanor. It was perhaps strange to say that her capacity for unexpected grief was one of the wonderful things about the child, but it was true.

One point was certain. This news and its effect must not forestall or delay the Mexican trip. Now it was more important than ever. Aunt Julia insisted on it.

And Eleanor, now physically a little stronger although mentally in a state of which she couldn't even try to take stock, allowed herself to be persuaded. She felt greatly like a murderer who had forgotten to flee. She couldn't bear to remain, to see the same streets and people, to look up at that wooded hill. For the first time in her life she couldn't endure to stay in this town.

So on Monday morning Aunt Julia drove her down to New York—Aunt Julia, who, they all predicted, would be a wheel-chair case and who had passed her driving test six months before. She put her niece on the plane and kissed her and said, "Good-bye, my darling. Don't bother to write much. Just a card once in a while to tell me you're safe. Don't even bother to put a message on it; just mail it to me. And hang on. Whatever's troubling you, hang on. Things always clear up—almost always, anyway. They will for you, I'm sure. Good-bye, my darling."

Then the city fell away. The plane hummed toward the sun, hung in mid-air between fantastic clouds and flapping laundry on the line, between limitless blue and the orderly rectangles of the man-bugs. As they climbed, Eleanor had the momentary illusion of soaring free, of emergence; but when the great ship leaned lazily around and leveled off on its course, she felt the intangible cloak still tight about her neck and shoulders, muffling and terrifying her.

. . . Still with her . . . impeding the motion of her

soul as a gag stifles speech. Only now there was no struggle. It was accepted.

She woke. Roy had reached over into the back of the car and touched her gently. "We're here," he said. There was an odd note of kindness in his voice. "Patzcuaro."

CHAPTER FOUR

*T*he hotel stood on the slope of an easy hill, only a garden's length from Lake Patzcuaro. Higher up the hill were the houses and churches of the town; along the flat shore of the lake were a few summer homes and some adobe farmhouses. Over the whole scene there hung a fragile, misty twilight. It was early autumn here by the lake; farther south it had still been summer, but here September held.

It was a relatively new hotel, only about two years old, and the manager had never heard of a local resident named Seastrom. As a matter of fact (Roy learned via Teodoro), the manager knew of only one American who lived in the vicinity: a man named Lucas who had a house outside the village of Tzintzuntzán.

Roy frowned. "Is he sure that this Lucas is the only one?"

Teodoro put the question to the manager in Spanish, then replied, "Yes, Señor Roy. This the only one he knows of. But he says this Lucas lives here a long time. Ten years maybe. He could maybe tell you what you want to know."

"Has Lucas got a phone?"

Another question to the manager. Consultation of a directory. "No, señor. But the village where he lives near, that's only a few miles back. We came through it on the way."

"Then you know how to get there?"

"I know the main road, sure, but he says this Señor Lucas lives up on a side road. He says we could easy miss it at night. Maybe we better wait till morning."

Roy had been anxious to settle his business as quickly as possible, but he didn't want to flounder on a muddy ox-cart road in the dark. "All right," he said, "maybe we'd better. Boy, I sure hope Seastrom is around here somewhere and that this Lucas fellow knows where. I don't want to have come two hundred and fifty miles for nothing."

He wished now that he had wired or phoned ahead; but after all he wouldn't have known whom to wire. Besides, even if he'd had a negative reply, that wouldn't have satisfied the company; they would have expected him to go on up anyway and find out as much as he could. However, it had never occurred to him that there would be any difficulty; the letter had said Seastrom was in Patzcuaro and he had accepted it as fact.

Eleanor came down from her room and met them in the oak-paneled bar. "Did you find out where Seastrom lives?" she asked.

"No," said Roy glumly, "and he may just possibly not be here at all." He relayed the manager's news. "Well, maybe this Lucas can give us a lead. Otherwise we'll have to search the town records." He turned to Teodoro. "They do have town clerks and records and things?"

"Sure," grinned Teodoro. "Where you think you are, Africa or something like that? Down in Chiapas, maybe, there wouldn't be no records. But here in Michoacán, they got everything like that."

"Michoacán." Eleanor repeated the four-syllable word. "That's nice. It's the name of this state, isn't it?"

"Sí, señorita," nodded Teodoro, warming, as always, whenever anyone said something nice about Mexico. His long experience with tourists had made him resigned about their intelligence and appreciation.

"Oh, that's nothing," said Roy. "Teodoro, what's the name of that village where Lucas lives?"

"Tzintzuntzán."

"Wonderful," Eleanor said, smiling. "It sounds Chinese. Does it mean something in Spanish?"

"Not in Spanish," said Teodoro. "Tarascan. That's the Indians in this part, their language. 'Tzintzuntzán' means 'hummingbird.' "

"Well, what do you know?" laughed Roy, and said the name a couple of times. "Hummingbird it is. A land of poets, Eleanor."

They finished their drinks and went into the dining room, where they were served by girls in Michoacán costume: long black skirts, full in the back, and white, high-necked, puff-shouldered, long-sleeved shirtwaists. Roy, as he watched them, thought that waitresses fell into fairly recognizable types the world over—the comely, faintly insolent ones, the thin, unhappy ones who are simply made all wrong and know it, and the merry fat ones who have too much of everything but are usually the most efficient.

The food seemed good to Roy and Eleanor, but Teodoro complained of its American taste and smothered it with pepper and sauces. "You know," Roy observed, "the common assumption about Mexican food is that it's very hot and spicy. The Mexicans tell you that's a fallacy, but when you taste their native food, it damned well *is* hot. It reminds me of Freud."

"What?" said Eleanor. "Of all things, why Freud?"

"Well, the common assumption about Freud is that

it's almost all sex. The Freudians tell you that's a vulgar fallacy, but when you read it, it damned well almost all *is*."

It was dark after dinner, too dark to take the walk that Roy had thought would be pleasant. For a moment, as they rose from dinner, he was foolishly panic-stricken as to how he was going to entertain his companion; but Teodoro suggested a game of cards. He always carried a deck in his dashboard compartment, he said.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," said Roy, with un-evident relief. "Do you feel like cards, Eleanor?"

She had brought nothing to read and her nap that afternoon doubly ensured the fact that she wouldn't get to sleep until very late. "Yes, all right," she said thoughtfully, and Teodoro went for the cards.

"Eleanor," said Roy kindly, "it's all pretty grim, isn't it? Things are pretty serious?"

"How do you mean, Roy?"

"Well, whatever comes up—a card game or do you prefer tea or coffee—it's a pretty big decision for you."

She tugged the corner of her handkerchief. "No," she said, "it's just that it takes me a little time to care."

For half a minute or so he considered pursuing the subject, then made up his mind to wait. The feeling was something like Christmas or a birthday; a mysterious tantalizing package he was not yet allowed to unwrap.

They settled on three-handed poker ("A nice cut-throat game," said Roy), and Teodoro found a table for them on a terrace overlooking the lake. There in the thick buttery glow of a hanging lantern, they played and talked and laughed a little—the guide with the bony, pleasantly horsy face, the man with the close-cropped head and young smile, the pale, pretty girl.

They played for about an hour. Teodoro won, thunderingly. "Gee, I feel bad to take your money," he said, then yawned.

"Yes, I can see it's going to keep you up all night," said Roy.

"Ha," laughed Teodoro heavily. "You sure are a funny fellow, Señor Roy," he said, putting his hand on Roy's arm, and they grinned, liking each other.

Teodoro asked to be excused. He'd had a long day, and tomorrow promised to be longer. They said good night to him and he strolled away with his short-legged, belligerently casual gait.

Roy shuffled the cards and cut them. "Gin rummy? Honeymoon bridge?"

"No," she said, "no more cards." She turned her chair so that she looked out over the lake and to the dark hills beyond. There was a slight chill in the air, and she drew her coat close around her neck. "Roy, suppose you don't find Seastrom tomorrow."

"Trouble. The studio'll be in a sweet fix if they don't get his release soon. Oh, well, he's probably around here somewhere. Probably this man Lucas knows something if he's been living here for ten years. Foreigners get to know each other in a place like this."

She nodded and settled back in her chair. "Well, I hope you find him. It would be interesting to meet him, just now."

Roy remembered that she had said something more or less like that in the restaurant last night. A spring of curiosities jetted up within him but he checked it with a sudden dam of etiquette: and at last past the wall of caution and politeness trickled the merest portion of what he was bursting to ask.

"Eleanor, I'm curious. The other day—yesterday, I guess it was, although it seems longer ago—you asked me not to ask questions. But surely you don't expect me never to ask any. I don't want to pry into your affairs . . ." He hesitated a moment. "Well, that's not true, of course. Every-

one wants to pry into other people's private affairs; they're the most interesting things about them. But," he said, "I don't expect to begin there. I'd just like to know—I'd very much like to know—just a little more about you." He laughed briefly and in high pitch, to show how ridiculous he thought it. "You see, I don't know *anything* about you. For instance, for all I know, you might be married."

"I'm not," she said.

"No, I didn't really suppose you were. I just meant that as an indication—of how little I know about you."

She hesitated a moment, then shook her head. "I shouldn't have come with you on this trip."

He shrugged. "I probably shouldn't have asked you. But I'm enjoying it. Aren't you?" The moment he said it, he realized he'd better not let that question bear the stress of too much silence after it. He hurried on. "Anyway, you're not really sorry you came?"

"I suppose not. I don't know. No, I guess not."

She looked so troubled that he was about to say she needn't bother with any of his questions. But just then she said, "I come from Connecticut, Roy. A town called New Gilead."

"Oh, I've heard of it," he nodded at once. "I think I've been there. Yes, I have been there. It's not far from Stamford. Very pretty, I remember." In a moment, he glanced up sharply. "Wait a minute. New Gilead. Shafer. Are you by any chance related to Wendell Shafer?"

"He was my father."

"Holy Jehoshaphat!" He stared at her. "I feel as if I ought to get up or something. Holy Hannah!"

She was neither amused nor embarrassed. She simply said, "Since he died, I've been living with my aunt. I teach school. At any rate, I used to teach school. That's about all."

He pursed his lips. Maybe it was better this way. Only a fool would try to tell more than the bare facts, for after

the bare facts, what really mattered except what he could see of her and find out for himself?

They sat there for some time longer. They talked a little of various things: Teodoro, Mexican drivers, the imperturbability of the various domestic animals that lay in the middle of the roads, the color of the mountains, the richness to the eye. Even though he did most of the actual talking, his mind was carrying on a kind of counterpoint to the conversation. He drew apart and looked at himself sitting here with this girl and wondered (a usual speculation of his) how he would ever explain this situation to anyone he knew. Suppose, for instance, Buck or Doris or G.P. should walk out on this balcony now; how could he make clear why he had invited this girl to accompany him, why she had accepted, who she was and why she attracted him. (Buck and Doris would have a sly explanation, of course.) What could he actually say? . . . "This is the daughter of the great Wendell Shafer, and I found her wandering around Mexico City in a daze—or rather, not wandering—and on the slimmest of pretexts I got her to consent to take this long trip with me, I asked her to come because she was quietly lovely and because this tantalizing gossamer floats about her; and so here we sit and now I can only hope this story will have a good ending that will make it worth telling. Maybe I can be Galahad and clear up whatever's troubling her. Maybe I'll fall in love with her. Maybe she'll fall in love with me. Meanwhile here we sit thousands of miles from home and she keeps attracting me with the selfsame veil that interposes itself every time I make a move. Oh, when I ask her a direct question, she makes an answer of some kind, but in a way it's as if she had forgotten I was here. And to top it all, I don't really mind that. Fascinating and frustrating, both. Damned odd. . . ."

Soon the day's journey began to tell on him. He chewed

back the latter half of a yawn and asked, "Are you tired, Eleanor? Would you like to go to bed?"

"No, I think I'll sit here awhile," she said. She looked at him. "But you go on if you like. Please do, if you want to."

"Well, if you really don't mind . . ."

He got to his feet. Huddled in her chair in her light dress and jacket, she seemed to sink, white and glimmering, farther down into the well of mountain night. "You'll be here in the morning, won't you?" he asked. Then he smiled, deciding to pass it off as a joke: "I mean, you won't have disappeared into thin air?"

She smiled a little too. "I promise."

"Good. Well—maybe Seastrom tomorrow, eh? Good night."

"I hope so. Seastrom, I mean. Good night."

Before he fell asleep, lying in the dark with his hands behind his head and wondering if she was still sitting like a transfixed penitent on the balcony, he thought of a conversation he would have liked to have with her.

While they had been sitting there smoking, she would have leaned impulsively on the arm of her chair next to him and said thoughtfully, "Roy, you don't care much for your work, do you?"

And he, gratified that he had been right in assessing her a perceptive person, would have replied innocently, "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, I think there's such a thing as a visible aura of discontent. Little things reveal it. You know they reveal it. And I don't think you care."

He would have shrugged, careful to avoid the look or sound of self-pity. "My job has done a lot for me. In many ways. I ought to be grateful for it."

"But," he would have said, and this is what he wanted

her to know, "it's odd that you should mention it. Because I've just been offered a publishing job in New York. A wonderful job. But it pays hardly anything."

He thought that if she knew about this problem of his, it might lend him weight, complexity, in her eyes.

And then if she had asked why he didn't make up his mind, he would have dipped into the ragbag of ready reasons, the scraps that needed only to be selected and re-arranged for the particular hearer. "Oh, hell, Hollywood's not so bad. A lot of pseudo intellectuals and one-shot artists like to moan that they're losing their souls out there. They remind me of the old maid who complained to the police that the man across the alley was undressing with the shade up. She said all she had to do was stand on a chair and she could see him plain as day." She would have smiled. Not much. But certainly some. "They complain a lot," he would have continued, "but they're not tied to the chair. Hell, Hollywood's not so bad. You have to grind it out, but you live like a gentleman. Anywhere else—in this other job, for instance—I wouldn't have the time or money for half the wonderful things I have now. Books, records, pictures. The way I look at it, I've got the fourteen-year-old minds of the world supporting my rather expensive tastes."

And she would have said—

What would she have said? He didn't know. He hardly knew a damned thing about her—except that, of all things on earth, she was Wendell Shafer's daughter. And she would never even have told him that on her own.

Well, Shafer's daughter was certainly raveled up in some kind of inner tangle. He was sorry that he'd ever got involved with her.

. . . No, he wasn't. He was just sorry that he was obviously so unimportant to her. And these adolescent imaginary dialogues, in which he showed off his worldliness and Weltschmerz, weren't going to help.

So he turned over and slept beautifully.

Eleanor sat for a long while on the balcony overlooking the night-emptied lake, enjoying the sensation of being on the brink of the lighted world, as if the choice were hers whether to be a citizen of that world or the black. Even the few visible stars could be blotted out for a time with the smoke of a cigarette. While she sat there, her mind was crammed to bursting, with thoughts and memories and flames; but none of those thoughts concerned Roy in the slightest.

Tod Lucas had been a newspaperman. About ten years before, he had retired to Mexico with his wife to live in a good-sized adobe house on a hillside overlooking the village of Tzintzuntzán and the old olive grove in the churchyard. When the maid announced his visitors, he came out into the flag-stoned courtyard, shook hands with the three of them and escorted them through the house to the patio. There he offered them drinks; Eleanor declined, but Roy and Teodoro said they'd have tequila with lime and salt.

"The right prescription, doctor," nodded Lucas. He called to the maid, who had lingered in the archway. "Frasca, make with three doses. Tequila and trimmings."

Lucas was forty-three, solid and barrel-chested, with arms as thick as thighs, a square-shaped head with red cheeks and a thatch of light-brown hair faintly touched with gray. He had a wide, curving, slightly open-mouthed smile and little eyes that sank almost out of sight behind his round cheeks. He talked in a slow, drawling manner that had a vague air of being deliberately cultivated, and his diction was somewhat faded slang liberally sprinkled with his favorite tense, the historical present. He gave the impression of being, rather consciously, an easy Broadway character, which seemed especially incongruous in this setting.

While they were waiting for the drinks, Roy handed him his business card and said he had come up here looking for Earl Seastrom, the famous flier. "I was told he lives in these parts, Mr. Lucas. Do you happen to know him?"

Lucas stared at him a moment as if incredulous. "Do I know him?" He leaned back in his chair and laughed three short syllables. He looked like a red-cheeked ingenuous farm boy grown older and a little fat. "Do I know Earlie? Are you perhaps kidding? I am practically the guy's father and mother." He chuckled. "Do I know Earl Seastrom."

Roy glanced at Eleanor. This was luckier than he had dared to hope.

"Why," Lucas continued without prompting, "I am practically the guy who pulls him out of the water after the flight. Well, at least I am the first one to talk to him *after* that. I am his personal aide-de-camp. I am his public-relations character. I write his life story. I am Mr. Tennant's personal contact with him. Yes," he said finally, "I know him."

"Tennant? You used to work for Tennant?"

"Sixteen years with the Tennant papers. From the time I am seventeen until ten years ago, when the wife and I take a powder down here. I am Tennant's ace correspondent, practically, and he sends me to New Zealand to be there when the kid lands. Like I say, I am only the second person to talk to him after he gets pulled out of the drink. Earl and me are closer than clams."

"I see," said Roy. "And does he live around here?"

Lucas shook his head. "Nope. He *was* here. Came down and lived here with us almost a year. But you are over five years too late, doctor."

A woman came out of the house carrying a tray with a tequila bottle, glasses, and the other requisites. She was about forty, barefoot but obviously not a native. She wore a print frock that was much too tight for her full-bosomed,

slightly stout body. Her hair was brushed back cleanly from her ruddy, freckled face; she had a snub nose and green eyes and high cheekbones. "Honey," she said, and if the first word wasn't enough, she went on to reveal a southern accent, "Frasca tol' me we had callers. Thought I might better bring out the drinkin' liquor myself."

"Sure, jughaid," said Lucas. "Want you to meet the company, anyway. Company, here's the little woman, Alabam." He introduced the guests and Alabam served the drinks. Before the men had fairly settled back in their seats with theirs, she had quietly finished one shot and was pouring another.

"Bam," chuckled Lucas, "you know what Mr. Anderson asks me? If I know Earl Seastrom."

"Well, pappy," she said, after looking up at him from the bottle, "I guess you tol' them." To Roy, she said, "Pappy was ol' Earl's buddy afore and after the flight. An' Earl, he lived with us down here for 'most a year."

"So Mr. Lucas says," Roy replied. "He tells us we're five years too late."

"That's right, Mr. Anderson, honey," said Alabam.

Roy felt he had contained his urgency long enough. "Well, where is he now?" he asked.

Lucas shook his head, finished his drink and sucked a lime. "Sure wish I knew. I sure would admire to help you find him. But I got no more idea where he is than you have, doctor."

"Oh," said Roy. Then he said, "But don't you even know where he went when he left here? We could follow him up."

Lucas shrugged. "This I have attempted myself. When he leaves here five years ago he says he is going to M. C. to rustle up a job and he will drop us a line. He drops us just that: one postcard, saying he is O.K. But no address."

"Where'd the card come from?" asked Roy.

"M.C. Mexico City. And the next time I am down there I take a gander in all the likely places. But no Earlie. And ever since then I am stymied. Over five years. Haven't heard a word from him or about him since." He took a long thin cigar from his pocket and pulled the band off. "What is cooking, anyway? How come your company desires to see ol' Earl after all these years?"

Roy, disappointed, couldn't see any harm in telling him. Perhaps the studio's anxiety—and the potential benefit to Seastrom—would encourage Lucas to dredge up some disremembered clue. So Roy told him briefly about the picture that was planned, that they had to find Seastrom to get a release on his name and life and that there was a nice check in it for the flier.

"Sure is a shame," said Lucas soberly. "An eighteen-carat setup like that and I cannot help to bring you and the ol' professor together."

"Not a thing?" said Roy.

"I am knuckling my skull," sighed Lucas. "Not a thing. Have not heard a single word since when I said." His wife was pouring her third shot of tequila. "Aw, jughaid," he said, "relax a leetle. You got a long day ahead of you."

"Now, pappy," she replied, "don't you fret. It's jes' all this talk about ol' Earl. Makes me feel so sad and lonesome. Don' you feel sad an' lonesome too?" She leaned across the table and filled his glass again.

The shelf under the table was loaded with comic books and popular magazines and American newspapers folded open to the sports pages. Roy supposed this was how Lucas kept his lingo more or less up to scratch here in this remote village.

Roy said, "But it seems impossible that a man—I mean someone as well known as Earl Seastrom—could just drop out of sight. Did you ever try to locate him after that one look around?"

"Well," said Lucas as he lit his cigar, "I do not call in the coppers, if it is that to which you are referring. I do not think there is foul play at the crossroads. The kid has just moved on and forgets to leave his address. Five two and even he turns up some morning with the milk. I do not see that it is a matter for the G-men, even the Mex G-men."

Roy shook his head doubtfully. "Someone's going to have to uncover him. There's a lot of dough riding on this pitch, as far as my company's concerned. They have to get his release; so they'll have to have him traced. And it shouldn't be too difficult. He's probably working in aviation somewhere."

"Probably," agreed Lucas. "Well, if they find him, I sure hope you will let us know. We would enjoy to hear from the old professor again. Long time no postcard."

"All right, I'll see that they inform you," nodded Roy. "Just wish there was more to go on at this end."

Lucas spread his hands, meaty palms up, to express his sympathy and helplessness.

Alabam turned now to Eleanor, who had been listening studiously, sitting with her hands between her knees. "Honey, you jes' along for the ride? Or you with the movie pitcher company too?"

"No, I'm not with the company. I came—just for the ride, I suppose. And because I would have liked to meet Mr. Seastrom."

Lucas folded his thick arms on the table and leaned forward pleasantly. "Any special reason, kid?"

She couldn't tell the special reason. She would tell the more vendible one. "Well, Mr. Lucas—"

Tod raised a hand. "Take it easy on that 'Mr. Lucas,' " he smiled. "You'll wear it out. The name is Tod."

She nodded thanks and said, "Well, Tod, I was one of the school children who helped welcome him to New York

fifteen years ago. I was just curious to see what he's like now."

"Is that a fact?" said Tod. "Well, well. Gee, I did not even think that people still remembered ol' Earl. And here, in one morning, a big-type picture company wants his life and a girl who must have been in pigtails when he hopped the pond, she is disappointed because she does not meet him."

"Oh, people haven't forgotten the really big names of those days," said Roy. "At most, they just need a gentle reminder. Anyway, that's what my company is banking on."

"May be right," Lucas squinted, chewing his cigar, "may be right. What do you think, jughaid?"

"Well, pappy," said Alabam as she took a pinch of salt for her fourth drink, "we-all certainly didn't fo'get him, did we?"

"No, we did not," admitted Tod. "But then we are the kid's pals."

"Honey," said Alabam to Eleanor, "too bad you got to be disappointed. A real rootin' shame, honey. Here, you jes' have yo'self a little drink instead." She filled a jigger for Eleanor and pushed the salt and limes toward her.

Eleanor was about to refuse, then changed her mind and took it.

Now that he'd found out this was a dead end, Roy was impatient to leave, so that they could have lunch and start back to town. As soon as he learned there was nothing to be gained here (a common phenomenon with him) the sunlight seemed to dim, the faces of the Lucases turned slightly gray; and he wanted to move on. However, he couldn't simply get up and leave just because he was disappointed, especially since the Lucases were so cordial. He tried to catch Eleanor's eye to indicate that they were stuck for a bit, but she was busy with Alabam, learning how to drink tequila.

So they talked, Alabam punctuating the talk with

drinks. Tod and Roy and Teodoro trailed her at about the rate of one to two, but she seemed at least as unaffected as the men. Tod told them about the days following the flight; what it had been like to travel around with Seastrom in those volcanic months of spotlighted hubbub. He even dug out a copy of his book, a cheap reprint of the life story he had written for the Tennant chain of papers, and gave it to Roy. "The Flight of the Western Victory by Earl Seastrom as Told to Tod Lucas." The Western Victory was the name of the plane that had been designed by Seastrom and Connell and built with Tennant's money.

About five years after the end of the Seastrom hulla-baloo (Tod went on) he had quit his job and come down to Mexico to write a book of his own. That was ten years ago. He was still working on it. They liked their life here; liquor was cheap, they didn't require much food, and he'd laid out a miniature golf course behind the house. Occasionally he wrote a lurid article for the Tennant Sunday supplements on Mexican folklore which he picked up on little jaunts roundabout and then distorted. Mr. Tennant still took an interest in him, he was happy to say; hadn't forgotten Tod even though he'd gone to the Senate in the interim. Made sure that all Tod's articles were bought and that he was paid top prices.

And what had Seastrom himself done in the years right after the flight? And why had he come down to Mexico?

"Oh," replied Tod, "ol' Doc Seastrom just rolls along, like ol' man river. He has himself one job, then another and another. Finally he is worn down to the thin edge, I suppose, and one day six years ago we open the door and there he is. He moves in and stays. And we are mighty glad to have the old professor on the premises. Then one day he says he is tired of doing nothing and he is lighting out for M.C. to see what is doing in the way of employment. And that is the last

we hear from the character. And that is why I say he will turn up some morning for breakfast."

"The only trouble is," said Roy, "we can't wait for that. We have to go after him. Was there anything special that he said he wanted to do? Any particular kind of work?"

"Nope. He didn't sound particular. Just a feather in the well-known breeze."

"Sure, honey," added Alabam, "that's ol' Earlie. Happy-go-lucky."

Roy excused himself as soon as he decently could. He thanked the Lucases for their hospitality and the book, and for their information, disheartening as it was. Tod smiled his slow smile and said, "Nothing at all, doctor. Sorry you had to drive all that long way for a bad shake."

"If you should hear anything about Seastrom," said Roy, "will you let them know at the address on that card I gave you?"

"Betcha," nodded Tod and closed the car door for Roy. "Well, thanks for the visit. We don't get many callers. Guess we are too far from a subway."

Alabam said, "So long, honey."

As they drove away, they saw the miniature golf course behind the house. "I guess that's what they do when there are no visitors," said Roy, and then fell gloomily silent.

When they were halfway back to the hotel, Teodoro said, "Gosh, Señor Roy, I feel almost like I was personal disappointed, like I want to find this Señor System myself."

"Seastrom," said Roy.

Eleanor discovered that she, too, felt somewhat disappointed, and she was pleasantly surprised. Merely traveling with Roy had helped to arouse some anticipation; now, after coming two hundred and fifty miles with him to try a door, she felt the lowest common denominator of disappointment at finding it locked, and this disappointment—slight as it

was—pleased her. It argued interest; and interest—in anything, any smallest manifestation of the future—had up to now been stunned in her and gelid. Something in her, objective, high, impersonal, had been watching for a flicker of its awakening—the first thin green shoot up through the frozen earth; perhaps this was it.

. . . And then with a rush of guilt she wondered what right she had to possess an objective, untouched corner of her mind, and what right she had to watch for a flicker of interest, as if she hoped for more to follow, as if it were only a matter of time until she was “normal” again; as if the death of the dead were something from which we must recover and a love otherwise infrangible is gradually dissoluble if the man makes the mistake of dying.

So the brief pleasure gave way to shame; and the shame itself soon lost its outlines in the general black current that raced ceaselessly through her, unnamed except that the pulse, the rhythm of the current (she knew) was hopelessness itself.

And, she thought, almost speaking aloud, there is nothing I can *do*.

“Eleanor,” said Roy, “I’m sorry. I feel I ought to apologize to you. Wild-geese chase.”

“Don’t be foolish, Roy,” she replied. “It was a lovely ride up here. It would have been nice to meet Seastrom—but it was still worth while. It did all I expected of it.” Two days less. “It’s you I’m sorry for. What will you do now?”

“Well,” he sighed, drumming on the cover of Tod’s book, “nothing much I can do. Not a damned thing to go on. I’ll ask our local manager to make a few inquiries, but when I get back to the city tonight I’ll have to send the studio a wire telling them we’re up the crick.”

“And what will they do? Advertise in the papers? Hire investigators?”

“They’ll get to work on it all right, pull every string they can, but they’ll keep it as quiet as possible. They cer-

tainly won't advertise. They don't want to tip the idea of the picture to any other studio. You can register ideas and all that, but it's still pretty easy to lift a general theme, sort of; and there are plenty of people out there waiting to do that. We'd rather lead the parade. No, we'll have to move quickly but quietly."

Back at the hotel, as they were finishing their lunch, a waitress came up to Teodoro and spoke to him in Spanish. Teodoro asked her a puzzled question; the girl nodded and replied. Teodoro looked at Roy, shrugged, and asked to be excused; he followed the waitress out.

In a minute he returned. "Hey, Señor Roy," he said, "that Señor Lucas's maid—what's her name, Frasca—she's outside with her uncle. She wanna see you. She says she got something she wanna tell you."

CHAPTER FIVE

“So?” said Roy. “Werry interesting. Eleanor, let’s go see what it’s all about.”

After the upsurge of guilt in the car, she refused to let herself care one way or another, but she couldn’t think quickly enough of a plausible reason for declining.

“Well,” smiled Roy, “another big decision? Why don’t you just come along?—Bang, like that.” He snapped his fingers.

“All right.” And, like a drunk who walks especially stiffly to fool the onlookers, she forced herself to say, “I wonder what she wants.”

Frasca and a sandaled old man were standing in the road at the bottom of the wide hotel steps. She had a shawl pulled over her head; the man, who wore the typical white pajamalike suit of the Indian farmer, took off his sombrero as Teodoro came back with his two Americans.

“Buenas tardes, señor, señorita.” The maid bobbed her head, and the old man repeated words and action. Frasca looked vengeful and determined, but the man was embarrassed, fearful, and glanced continually from one side to the

other. He had a thin, hook-nosed face; she was plump, with dark circles under her eyes, and her voice had the timbre of a perpetual cold.

"I see you at house," said Frasca, "and I hear what they tell. That not right. That not all. I tell right, I tell right," she said eagerly. "Me and my ohnkle. I tell right. Only," she frowned, "I not talk so good."

Roy's expression didn't change, but as he shot a quick glance at Eleanor, a tremor of excitement ran through him, cracking the blank façade that had confronted him. Until this moment there had been no opening, no doubt that there would be no opening. Facts were facts, and why should they be doubted? Lucas had said how things stood, and Roy had believed him. But now, at the slightest nudge, the situation shifted, like an exhibit on a revolving stand, and another view came into being. A word from this maid and what had been accepted as the only truth leaned a little; possibilities were born.

"Well," said Roy cheerfully, "you speak to Teodoro here and he'll translate for me." Frasca stared at him uncomprehendingly. "Go ahead. You talk to Señor de Lara and he'll tell me what you say."

Teodoro said something in Spanish; she nodded quickly and began to spout. Roy saw Teodoro look at him queerly in the middle of her outburst.

"Well?" he interrupted impatiently.

"She says," Teodoro replied, flaunting his long vowel, "she got a lot of things to tell about Señor Seastrom, that what Señor Lucas says was a lotta lies. Hey, you know, Señor Roy," he added softly, "I think she thinks you're from American police."

"O.K.," said Roy coolly, "let her keep on thinking so. But tell her to come to the point."

"Pretty tough for a Mexican to come right to the point," grinned Teodoro, "but I try." There was more Spanish,

during which the girl grew more vehement and her uncle continued to look shiftily from side to side.

"She must have told you something by now," said Roy. "Does she know where Seastrom is?"

"No, she don't say about that," answered Teodoro. "But she says that when this here Señor Seastrom live here with Señor Lucas, he was a pretty bad feller. Drink a lot and—and make a lot of trouble. Fights, and like that. He make a bad name, always drinking, drunk most of the time, and always, well, like making trouble, fighting and hurting."

Ah, thought Eleanor, this was better. This was comfort, consolation, to learn that the hero, sanctified in press and legend, was not all of a heroic piece; that there was a reverse to the medal. There were flaws in the brave man just as in her, who had not a scrap of bravery. He was down there in the pit right alongside her, for all his heroism, and that was a shred of bitter comfort.

"What's all that got to do with me?" demanded Roy, not particularly impressed with this new information because he didn't yet believe it. "I'm not interested in giving him a good conduct prize. I just want to locate him. Does she know where he is?"

The girl spoke again. Teodoro turned to Roy. "She says she's coming to that. First she's got to tell you this."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," said Roy, then reflected that he'd better take it as she gave it or he might not get it. "All right, but tell her to keep it moving."

The girl gushed Spanish, this time with violent gestures. At length she ceased and Teodoro spoke again. "I make it short. She say one night her uncle was in a pulquería in the town here—that's a kind of saloon—and he was minding his own business and this here Señor Seastrom he came in drunk and he got more drunker and all of a sudden her uncle didn't do nothing but this Señor Seastrom he started to hit him. Just mean, she says he was. Always mean. She says all

her uncle did was he didn't get up quick enough out of a chair Señor Seastrom wants to sit in. And there was plenty other chairs, place was almost empty. But he hurt this man very bad. Before anybody can come to stop him, he pretty near killed him."

"Sí," exclaimed the girl and grabbed her uncle's head, turning him around to display an ugly scar that ran behind the ear down the neck. For the first time, the old man stopped shifting and gazed at them steadily, sidewise, with a patient, bovine, long-suffering expression, his head in his niece's firm grasp like a steer's at the market.

Roy stared at the scar stolidly. Well, now it was true. He dismissed the possibility that the girl was lying. First, why should she lie? For what conceivable gain? Second, this tavern story was much too simple and unmotivated to be fabricated.

Although he certainly was not gullible about big, publicized reputations, Roy found himself wincing inwardly a little. His long experience with magazines and movies had taught him that there was usually considerable difference between an image presented to the public and the reality behind it. But he winced now because Seastrom was a figure out of his youth when he had still been able to worship popular heroes. If Seastrom had risen to fame when Roy was older, he would not now have been the least surprised, would indeed have been somewhat amused. But the man was a myth out of his rosy years, and it was a minor but real shock now to discover that he was imperfect. Evil, like love, begins anew in the world for each man when he becomes capable of it.

Well, then, if it was true, this girl's story, *why* was it true? Was this simply another case of the hero in public who was a blackguard in private? No one—and he had talked to at least a dozen people who had met Seastrom, some of whom had known him fairly well—had ever hinted at any

scandal about the young idol of fifteen years ago; and they were all wise guys, "insiders," who would have been happy to know a little something extra special if they could have done so. But all they had ever said against him was that the kid had been very nervous and not too bright; no hint of anything like this sort of shenanigan. Then how had he come to this? Why?

Yes, he thought as he looked at Frasca again and at the old man's eyes, she's telling the truth, all right. Damn it. But *why* is it true?

"O.K." He nodded to the girl. "I see the scar, O.K. But what's the point of all this? Was Seastrom arrested? Is he in jail now? Is that it?"

Another question by Teodoro, another long answer.

"No, señor. She says Señor Lucas took her uncle to the hospital then and paid all the bills. And then they gave her uncle some money, he shouldn't tell anything about it. They cover the whole thing up and never want to see him or his family again. She says she never would get a job up there if they know she is this man's niece."

"Listen," said Roy exasperatedly, "ask her where Seastrom is now, will you? Tell her that's all I give a damn about."

Another Hispanic exchange, and Teodoro said, "Here it comes now, Señor Roy. She says Lucas sent Señor Seastrom away out of this here part before her uncle got out of the hospital. They didn't want him around for her uncle to have him arrested or to make more trouble. She says she heard around the house that Lucas got Señor Seastrom a job, down south somewhere. A job with a—a—" He broke off and asked the girl a question; she replied. He nodded and continued: "A job with a water-power kind of thing. You know—a dam or something like that, that the government was building then. And she says Lucas got maybe two, three letters from him after he left. She says Lucas knows where

he is. Anyway, Lucas knows where he went to first. She says you should find out from Lucas and follow Seastrom and arrest him."

Roy snorted. "Sure. Tell her Sleuthfoot Anderson always gets his man."

The girl at least understood his affirmation. "Gracias, señor. Muchas gracias."

"Although I don't see what she's got to complain of. Her uncle got paid off," Roy said sardonically, "and it was obviously enough to keep him quiet for over five years."

"You find, señor?" asked the girl. "You take to jail? My poor ohnkle."

"Your poor uncle didn't even want to come here today," replied Roy. "However, I'm glad you brought him. Though I suppose you want something else besides justice." She stared at him perplexedly, and he handed her a ten-peso note.

She burst into profuse thanks and Roy lifted both hands to quiet her. "All right, all right, thank *you* very much. At least you've given us a lead. So long now, so long, so long."

Teodoro spoke briskly to her, and still bobbing her head in thanks, she took her nervous old uncle by the arm and hurried down the road.

Roy watched them leave. "That son of a bitch Lucas," he muttered.

Eleanor said, "Then you think she was telling the truth."

"Yes. Don't you?"

She nodded. "She turned up here so quickly after we got back. She hardly had time to invent all that."

"I don't think she could have invented it anyway. She might tell a lie or two along the way, but she couldn't invent an entirely new character for the guy."

"Yeah," interposed Teodoro, who caught the drift, "she maybe say it rain yesterday if it didn't, something like that."

But she don't make up a whole story, something like that. She don't have brains enough. I think she tell you the truth."

"Yep. Well," sighed Roy, "I was asked to find Seastrom—hot or cold, no matter what. Besides, I'm a little peeved with our good friend Honest Tod. Teodoro, would you please get the car?"

"Yes, señor. Right away." He disappeared around the corner of the hotel, a shade faster than usual, almost hurrying.

"I don't understand it," Roy scowled. "Why did Lucas stall us? He must know I don't care what Seastrom did down here. Why, Peerless would do its best to keep this whole thing quiet if they're using the guy's life in a picture. Lucas is a smart guy, he's worked on papers, he knows the score. He knows that it's only to Seastrom's advantage for me to find him, and still he—" He clenched his teeth. "Well, whatever he did it for, it makes me goddam mad. All that glad-hand, plumb-sorry-I-cain't-help-you stuff. I want to talk to that joker."

"I'll wait for you here, Roy," said Eleanor. It sounded as if it was going to be unpleasant. Unavoidable for Roy, of course; he had to get to the bottom of it. But she needn't witness it and listen to the hot words; she could hear the result of the encounter.

"Well," he said tentatively, "it would be a help if you came with us, Eleanor. Then we won't have to drive back here to pick you up. Means coming five or six miles for you, and then backtracking again. Would you mind? I'd like to get into the city early as possible tonight." He added: "You won't have to come in to see Lucas, you know. Teodoro can wait in the car with you."

"All right," she said, "I'll wait in the car, then."

"Good." He looked at her, then smiled and touched her arm. "There's really nothing to be afraid of."

She considered replying to this, then decided to accept it.

They were as silent on the ride back to Tzintzuntzán as they had been on the way to the hotel. When they turned off the main road up the hill toward Lucas's, Roy said, "Still can't figure it. Even if, for some reason, he didn't want to tell me, why didn't he just say he didn't know? Why all that baloney about Mexico City?"

As they approached the house, they saw Lucas out on the miniature golf course pulling weeds, the butt of a cigar clenched between his teeth, his sleeves rolled up high on his big round arms. In the near-by shadow of the wall that surrounded the house, Alabam reclined in halter and shorts on a faded old beach chair, a bottle of tequila on the ground beside her. Evidently she had dispensed by now with the salt and limes.

"Look," said Roy. "Mr. and Mrs. Average Citizen at home."

Teodoro drove up close and Roy got out. Eleanor knew now that if there was going to be an argument she would have to see and hear it.

As Roy approached, Lucas eyed him for a moment from his squatting position before he slowly rose erect. "Hello, doctor," he said, taking the cigar from his mouth. "Have not seen you in a dog's age."

"Hiya, honey," called Alabam from her chair, disclosing with her first words that she was thickly drunk and that she was accustomed to being drunk. "Sure didn' expect to see you-all so soon again."

"I guess you didn't," said Roy. "Lucas, I just came back to ask a few more questions. Do you mind?"

"My pleasure," smiled Tod. "Admire to help you any little way I can. Shall we go inside and draw up cheers and say interesting things to one another?"

"No, this won't take long," Roy replied. He didn't want to be trapped in the accouterments of sociability; he wanted to reserve the right to get angry. "We can do it right here."

"Hey, don' you-all wan' a drink?" called Alabam from her chair. "Pappy, you make 'em all set down take a drink. Pappy—"

"Now, jughaid," said Lucas, "you just relax yourself. Everything is under control. We will be over to join you in a lamb's frisk." He turned back to Roy, tacitly inviting him to proceed.

"Lucas, I made a few inquiries after I left here this morning," said Roy, "and I found out a few things. The facts don't quite tally."

Tod was still smiling. Nothing had changed in his face or eyes; but he had sent out invisible antennae.

"I do not follow you, doctor," he said. "What kind of facts?"

"About Earl Seastrom. I heard that he made quite a reputation for himself while he lived here, all bad; that he finally got in a jam and had to be hustled south. I also heard," he continued, "that you found him a job down there and that you've had word from him since."

Tod continued to smile. "I hope you did not pay much for that information, Mulligan. You have been took."

"I don't think so. I got it from the horse's mouth, so to speak. I saw the old man's neck."

Lucas blinked his eyes slowly, then he said, "You know, doctor, jughaid is right. We maybe had better sit down and chew a couple of drinks over this."

"If you don't mind, Lucas, I'd rather get to the point. We have to be driving back."

The man shrugged in mild, ultrahonest bewilderment. "Well, what is it I can do for you, ol' chum?"

"You can kindly tell me where Seastrom is." Roy thrust his hands into his back pockets. "I don't get this routine,

Lucas. You dish out all this big buzzoo about being Seastrom's friend and then you give me this stall. You know I only want to see him for his own good, I don't give a rap about his private life. So why all this hocus-pocus? Are you sore at him? Do you want to keep him from getting this check?"

"You have got it all wrong," replied Lucas, shaking his head. "Like I told you, me and ol' Earl are pals."

"Pals," agreed Alabam decisively from her chair, as she set down her bottle again. "Been thinkin' 'bout him ever since you went away this mornin', honey. Pals."

"You hear?" said Lucas, gesturing with his head toward his wife.

"And if that's the case, why won't you help me find him?"

Tod chuckled. "You sure are a tough customer to convince, Mulligan." He sat on the edge of one of the inclined golf greens. "You now know all I know about ol' Earlie."

"No," said Roy, "I don't know the name of the water-power project."

Tod stopped rolling his cigar between his fingers. He studied it for a minute, then tossed it away.

Roy pursued his advantage. "Listen, Lucas. I don't know what's behind all this—personal spite or what. But finding Seastrom is very important to my company. Which is a big company. Which has a lot of friends in Mexico. Now suppose that I, as a representative of Peerless, informed the police that you helped hush up a criminal assault five years ago and helped the criminal to escape. There are witnesses. Suppose I went to the police."

Tod looked up. The eyes were now two blue-steel buck-shot, but the smile was more genuine than ever. "Doctor," he said quietly, "do not get in over your head."

"What do you mean?" demanded Roy. "You think I'm three years old? What do you mean—over my head?"

"I mean," Lucas said, staring at him dead-steadily, speaking precisely, "that what I told you about Earl is what I told you. That is the story. Those are the goods. You are only going to tucker yourself out chasing around. You might as well settle for what you know now."

"Why should I—if it's not the whole story?"

"Aw, Mulligan," drawled Lucas, "the whole story. What is a whole story? Who ever knew a whole story about anything? Why don't you take a tip, compliments of a friend? Do like you were going to do this morning. Report home that ol' Earlie doesn't live here any more and that you do not know to where he has moved. Because," he pulled the cellophane off another cigar, "that is the truth. You don't."

"And you do. And you're not going to tell me."

Lucas said, "Doctor, so help me. I have told you all I can."

A door slammed behind the wall. Tod glanced around. "I had better see who that is. Sometimes the Indian lads sneak into the house and raise a little ruckus. Things turn up missing. Pardon me, doctor." He ambled, hulking and slow, through the archway in the wall.

Roy felt like a fool. He had come up here determined to get angry, and even though he had done so to some extent, it had had no effect. Not even the mention of the police. And it had all happened in front of spectators. Now, to make it worse, he had been left hanging while Tod went off to see to some domestic detail. He didn't think he was going to learn anything more from the man, but he couldn't simply leave before Lucas returned; it would seem like running away. He had to wait here, suspended, just to be told again that there was nothing doing.

And he was still baffled. He couldn't see *why*.

"Honey." It was Alabam over by the wall. He'd forgotten all about her. Now she put her bottle down again, swung her legs off the beach chair and got up heavily.

"Honey, you take li'l Edna's *advice*. You listen to Edna. My name Edna Calkins 'fore I marry Pappy." Drink seemed to sift out what grammar she had normally. "An' you take li'l Edna's *advice*. You take yo'self away from here, honey, befo' Pappy comes back. No use ask him questions 'bout ol' Earl. He don' wan' bother ol' Earl. An' he don' wan' you bother ol' Earl."

"Why not, Alabam?" Roy asked.

"You leave ol' Earl 'lone. Can' find him anyway. You leave him 'lone, honey." She sounded more pleading than belligerent.

"Well, I'd like to oblige you, Alabam," said Roy placatingly, "but I'm afraid I can't."

She had come over to him. "You gotta go," she very nearly implored, "gotta go. You gotta leave ol' Earl 'lone."

He shrugged. "Sorry, Alabam. My company needs him for this picture."

She stood facing him squarely, staring drunkenly, weaving slightly. "Jesus. No, honey, you don' need him."

"Afraid we do."

"No, honey, no . . . you don' need him, you don' need him, you don' need him," Alabam moaned, shaking her head.

A door opened suddenly in the house out of sight behind the wall. A girl's voice poured out through the opening, hurling invective in Spanish. Frasca's voice.

"You don' need him," repeated Alabam.

Roy turned back to her from the sound of the maid's voice, which clearly had not penetrated to Alabam's brain. "Why don't we need him, Alabam?" he asked.

"Jesus." Her voice quavered and she looked up at him with sad, heavy-lidded, foggy eyes. "Wan' big heroes. Wan' big brave heroes. Movie pitcher heroes. Leave li'l ol' Earl be. Do' wan' him."

Roy peered at her, trying to read something in her

sodden face while his voice, detached, soothed her. "I'm sorry, Alabam. Very sorry. But, you see, they're going to make this picture about a lot of famous fliers, and Earl Sea-
strom is—"

"*Ohhh . . .*" A sudden sharp sob shook her, racked her torso, and tears welled into her eyes. She advanced a step or two doggedly, drunkenly, her fists clenched. "Leave him be!" she cried. "You leave that po' bastard be! 'Nough trouble 'bout that plane. He try to fo'get that goddam plane. He don' wanna hear no mo' 'bout that plane. He don't wanna *hear* 'bout it any mo'. He—"

"Bammy!" Tod's voice stabbed out ahead of him like a snake's tongue as he came through the archway.

She turned slowly, dazedly, sobbing a little. "'Lo, pappy. Li'l Edna. Li'l Alabam. She jus' try to tell him. She jus' tell him leave ol' Earl 'lone. 'Cause Earl, he jus' tryin' to fo'get how—"

"Now, jughaid," said Tod gently, paternally, and slammed her alongside the jaw with his great open palm. She fell sideways to the ground as if hit by a truck and lay there quite still, her mouth open.

Tod turned to Roy with his easy, slow smile. "You will excuse us now, doctor," he said. Then, just as lovingly as he had hit her, he picked up his wife and carried her—her arms dangling foolishly—through the archway into the house.

CHAPTER SIX

As they drove back to Mexico City, the road dimmed away into darkness, out of which the headlights picked an occasional straggling farmer hurrying home with a high load of corn on his shoulders or a burro whose eyes shone placidly out of the night. From time to time the car sped through a village whose few lights tried futilely to burst the ribbon of dark on either side, then quickly surrendered and sank away.

"Teodoro," said Roy, "would you like to stop some place and telephone your wife that you're going to be late?"

"No, I don't need to. She don't look for me no special time. Besides," he grinned, "I don't wanna spoil her like American wives. I do that once, she gonna expect it every time."

"Atta boy. Treat 'em rough," nodded Roy abstractedly.

"Roy," said Eleanor, "I suppose that he's fired the maid."

"Yes, I guess that's what she was shouting about. Right, Teodoro?"

"Sí, señor. She was saying yes she was the one who told

you all about it and the man was her uncle and she was happy Lucas knew now and what was he gonna do."

"Well," said Roy, "at least I'm glad I thought to give her a little money."

"Boy," chuckled Teodoro, "you should have understood what she said. She sure said a couple of real things, señor."

"Eleanor," said Roy, "this whole business certainly turned out to be a frost for you. You not only didn't meet Seastrom, you got mixed up in a fracas. I'm sorry."

"Well, it was all right," she answered, sitting between the two men and staring ahead at the road, "it doesn't matter, Roy. Really . . ."

Spinning about her head like the rings of a planet were the echoes of that woman's voice: Alabam. She heard and reheard the quickened vibrant pitch as the voice plunged beneath the drunken and the maudlin to another world: to urgency and pain, the color of deep pity. It was that, under the winy tears, which had pierced her and clung: the real note of compassion, for a man in torment.

What was most strange was that this outburst of Alabam's had been almost a fulfillment of something in herself, something that had grown in her during Frasca's story about her uncle. She had felt an instant and perverse sympathy not for the uncle but for Seastrom, not for the obviously unoffending victim but for his assailant. The violence was seemingly so unmotivated that Seastrom had either to be insane or ill with frustrations to which his drinking had given a temporary false channel. This stupid brutality had been the outward manifestation of a canker, she thought, a desperate convulsion not to cause pain but caused by it. She didn't know why she had felt this at once; perhaps because she understood unreasoning desperation, perhaps because if she were a man, it was the kind of senseless, fleeting anesthesia she might have sought . . . hating it but doing it because, while she did it, she could at least loathe

herself for something she could see, the fist in the innocent face. She could both vent her unhappiness and ratify her hatred of herself with an action.

And this perverse understanding of him, this perhaps romantic but actual feeling, had been confirmed by Alabam, less by what she had said than by the anguished tone in which she had said it. By now Eleanor could recognize the climate of despair even when it was conveyed in an onlooker's voice.

Much good it would have done to meet this hero. He was as deep in the mire as she was.

She wondered why. She wondered what had happened since the flight to make him want to forget it. She wondered why Tod had—

No. She didn't wonder. She wouldn't wonder.

. . . She wondered what had happened to the paragon of youth, the iridescent hero. She wondered, too, whether Roy had sensed the same thing.

"Roy?"

"Mmm?"

No, it might very well be mere imagination on her part. Misery seeking company. She would sound foolish.

"What, Eleanor?" he asked.

She filled out her question with another subject. "What will you do now? About finding Seastrom?"

"Well, this trailing business isn't my job. I only came up here as a favor to the boss, because I happened to be on the spot—more or less. Now it'd be best to wire the Coast that Seastrom wasn't in Patzcuaro and write them a report and let it go at that."

She nodded. Best for her too. Then she could forget about the whole thing and not have her troubles troubled.

"But," he continued, "that guy Lucas got my cork. First his lying made me mad, and now I'd like to know why he did it. And then the way he clipped his wife when she

started to talk. Something is rotten in the state of Michoacán. Why should Seastrom try to forget that plane? I'd like to find out what it's all about—if possible. Eleanor, tell me, how did it strike you—what that woman said?"

"I thought it sounded—sincere."

"Exactly," he nodded. "Something underneath all this. Damned odd. Earl Seastrom. Queer, what happens."

"Well," he sighed, "there's only one slim thread to go on. I'll have our Mexico City man dig up what he can about water-power projects six years ago, and if it's not just a needle-in-the-haystack proposition, if there's a reasonable chance of finding out anything more, I'll follow it up."

"You said something to Lucas about the police."

"Just a bluff," he laughed, "which didn't work. Peerless *does* have a lot of connections down here, but the last thing they'd want, if they're going to use Seastrom in a picture is to stir up trouble with the police about his past. No, I'll just find out if there's anything to go on. If not, I'll throw the whole thing back in the studio's lap. . . . But I admit I hope I'll be able to go on. So far it's been like—like seeing people whisper. You want to find out what they're saying."

More than that, he was especially curious about how a world-famous man, apparently as successful as he could have wished, had reached the obviously unhappy condition that Seastrom had been in. Christ, thought Roy, the things that happen to men who seem to have all they could possibly want in the world.

There was a letter waiting for each of them at the Hotel Londres. Roy's publishing friend had written, informing him that matters were proceeding apace and that they needed his decision shortly; if Roy wasn't coming along they'd have to scout someone else for the job. As soon as he saw the envelope, Roy felt a guilty shrinking, as if he'd been confronted with evidence of a crime of his. And now instead

of facing the decision, or even considering facing it, he calculated rapidly by the date on the letter how long he could still wait before replying.

About a week. Then there was no rush. Anyway, the Seastrom thing (thank Heaven) had to be attended to first. Besides, there was no point in putting himself to the test in this job matter before he had to; it was vastly more enjoyable, in a way, to have the matter on the docket for a little while; to be able to juggle two possibilities, to know that two places wanted you. It wasn't merely a decision about a job, he reflected, it was also a species of moral decision. All the better. A nice juicy problem waiting to be attacked, like a savory holiday turkey. Much more fun to sniff at it for a bit than to plunge right in and finish it off.

Also, he still suspected that subconsciously he had already made up his mind; and he wanted to postpone disclosing his decision to himself.

Eleanor's letter was from her aunt Julia. She took it up to her room before she opened it; she didn't want to see any of the words, to have any of it in her mind until after she had accomplished the business of saying good night to Teodoro and good night and thanks to Roy. In her room (instantly, for all her absence, the *same* room), she turned on every light, hung up her coat carefully and then, quite deliberately, sat down and opened the envelope.

Aunt Julia, the darling, the dear, seemed to sense exactly what tone to take. She asked about Eleanor's health and said she hoped the trip was doing what it was supposed to do. Then, fairly soon, she said that she had known that Eleanor was upset by Mr. Digby's death and that any reference to it might be dangerous; yet she thought that Eleanor might want to know what had happened. She had gone to Stamford to the crematorium; the memorial service had been short and simple and beautiful. A few friends of his had played some music; and another friend, an actor, had

read two Psalms. Then a closing piece of music. That was all.

Eleanor looked away from the letter, remembering her father's services in the same chapel, and remembered how she and Aunt Julia had gone around to watch the cremation through a little thick glass window. Dead themselves, they had watched the attendants thrust in the plain wooden box and, then, instead of any hideous burning, great garnet and yellow and blue flames had suddenly surrounded the box, and it had merely seemed to vanish, borne upward on leaping colors. She remembered how much better she had felt. It had seemed such a wonderful way for her father to disappear from the earth.

She thought now that it had happened to Ralph.

Then she thought that he need not have died.

Back to the letter. A few items of chat. Purposeless chat, purposely included. Surely Aunt Julia wasn't going to finish this way. She turned the page.

"Dear, a fortunate thing has happened. As you know, Mr. Digby wasn't due to announce the winning designer of Wendell's memorial until a week from now, and the Town Commission was pretty well confused—the closing date had passed but they'd had no hint of his wishes in the matter. Then Henry Van Nuys revealed that he had called on Mr. Digby the evening before his death and that Mr. Digby had told him he intended to give the award to an architect named Bernard Hayes. Van Nuys realizes there's only his word to go on, so he's sworn out an affidavit on his story; and as the Commission is willing to grasp at any straw—and as (I gather) this Hayes man has submitted a pretty good design—I hear that they're going to give him the award. Public announcement to be made, as scheduled, in a week or so. Have you ever heard of this man Hayes?"

It took perhaps half a minute for the lie to burst to the surface. The words produced no immediate effect because

the names of the two young architects weren't in the front of her memory. Then she remembered. It was Norris—Harry Norris—whose work Ralph had liked. Hayes was the other man, whom Van Nuys had tried to—

The letter had slipped to the floor. Her fists had clenched and she was crying; remotely she felt the tears slipping down her cheeks almost as if it were the face of a stranger which she had touched with her fingers. Her brain and heart throbbed so fiercely that she didn't know what she felt, didn't even know, until the tears came down, that she was crying. Only this terrible beating ache. This helplessness confirmed. Weak scratching helplessness—chiefly because she didn't have the strength or the right to be angry. She had so little standing in Ralph's life that she had no claim to rage. Only to peer through the fence and cry futilely and be sick. . . .

. . . But she could hate him, in the secret chambers of her soul, she could hate this man who meant to profit from Ralph's death, this wretch who meant to make money out of the disaster that had wrecked her life. Now at last she had an object, a reality to grasp, no mere shadowy effusion of her mind or imagined animosity of the world, but a man, a named man, an actual, crawling, conspiring, loathsome man. And as the enormity of his viciousness flooded in upon her, she pressed her hands against her mouth, against her teeth, to keep from screaming. . . .

Quite abruptly the tears stopped. She noticed that the lights were on. Although she'd put them on herself, she felt suddenly displayed as if she had been sitting on a blazingly illuminated stage. She hurried over and switched off all but one dim corner lamp. Now she was more at home, in the darkness that didn't grate against the temper of her mind.

And now in the dark her mind began to function. Slowly, with increasing clarity, she began to see that in

reality this man Van Nuys had done her a monstrous kind of good turn.

For now she not only had someone to hate, she had something to do. An act she could perform. He had given her a weapon. She could fight back.

Until now she had been lost in a febrile jungle of impotence, shackled to her grief. There had been nothing—nothing in reality or imagination—to cure or palliate it, she could only endure it as best she might. But now there was something to *do*—a concrete act. A wrong she could right, a lie she could lay bare. Not atonement or repayment. (How did one repay for Ralph Digby's life? At what window of what theological bank?) But now, with something close to joy, she saw that Van Nuys had unwittingly set her a task. It would at least help to exorcise the demons, it would at least give her the chance to shake off her present misery with motion.

She could go back to New Gilead and make certain that the last artistic act of Ralph's life was not distorted by this venal and corrupt liar.

There was a plane early in the morning. With luck she could get a seat on it and be home late tomorrow night. Then by the day after tomorrow, she could go to the Town Commission and expose this scoundrel. She could tell them Ralph's real choice . . .

. . . And they would ask her how she knew.

The opportunity was still there, the chance to strike a blow at her own bondage; but now she saw the consequences.

She saw the serpent uncoiling from the egg; the whole fabric of whispers and scandal rising out of the first seemingly harmless statement that she had been at Ralph's house that night. Since she would have opposed Van Nuys's sworn affidavit, she would be questioned; and she could imagine with chilling ease how Van Nuys (or, merciful God, his

lawyer!) would seek to make the most of her presence at Ralph's, would adduce innuendoes. If they didn't bring out the truth, they would at least leave a wide gap for the gabblers of the town to traverse with their obscene thoughts.

Was there another way? Could she say that Ralph had told her about Norris earlier? But Norris's entry, duly stamped, had arrived on the very day of Ralph's death; and his servants, who hadn't left until about eight that evening, could testify that she hadn't been there before then. If she knew about Norris, then she must have arrived some time after eight. They would ask why she had gone there. They would ask where she had been during Van Nuys's visit. They would ask, if she hadn't hidden in the house, where she had gone; for her aunt's visitors would know she hadn't come home. They would ask, ask, ask . . .

She would have to choose one way or the other. She would either have to remain quiet or tell the whole truth.

Neat. Transfixed. The pin through the butterfly's heart. And to unfix the pin meant showing the wound.

If I dare, she thought. If I dare to go back there and set their tongues clacking, making parlor merchandise of what was ours only. If I dare to let them smear his name and, through me, my father's name—the man they want to memorialize with this award. To do this thing for Ralph I'd have to damage the name of the man he wanted to honor.

And there was more than her father. There was Aunt Julia. There was also herself.

Now, as she looked up, great grinning iron figures ranged themselves around the room, a jury of implacables with the faces of Aztec gods. They grinned at her with wide smiles and frightened eyes, daring her and pitying her if she should dare. They inched in closer in a semicircle, closer and closer around, shoulder to shoulder, then stopped; and grinning still, silently asked the one question.

The morning plane for New York left at eleven, and places had to be secured no later than ten. At ten o'clock the next morning Eleanor left the hotel and walked a few blocks, then took the first bus that came along. One could always take a bus in Mexico City; there seemed to be a bus line on every street.

The terminus of the line was a group of new, modern apartment houses in the suburbs. She got off and walked for a while in the morning sun, skirting the city but finally turning back toward the heart of town. As the streets grew narrower and dirtier, she came to busy sidewalk markets crowded with stands and people. She liked these streets better; here she felt absorbed and anonymous. Soon she turned a corner and three long blocks lined thickly with high-banked flowers stretched away before her—the great flower market of the city. She passed through it, buoyed and enveloped by the mingled scents, seduced into forgetfulness like Ulysses' crew among the lotuses.

Then, as the market receded, she remembered again.

For so long (a week, ten days, in calendar time but immeasurable really) she had been racked, because there had been no point in revealing that she was responsible for Ralph's death. And now that there was point and purpose, she knew, knowing herself at last, that she couldn't do it.

The plane left at eleven (perhaps it was one of those she had heard buzzing through the sky) and she had walked out of the hotel at ten. She had run away. All night she had known she was going to run away, so when she came downstairs and walked past the travel desk out into the street, there had been no strain, no conflict. She had simply watched herself do it and had thought: It's only what I expected. The brain is convoluted and the body follows the fold. This is right, this is safe, this is natural for me. And who can blame me for doing it? She had searched the faces in the lobby. Who wouldn't be safer if he could? Who are the heroes?

You by the cigar stand, the barbershop, the news counter, you or you or you?

No answer. So she had fled into the morning, carrying sealed within her the hour in which she had answered the question for herself. "In a real dark night of the soul," Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, "it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day." And three o'clock went with her, preserved, a fly in amber.

Afraid. . . . The word echoed through the teeming city. . . .

No, Van Nuys's unwitting favor was no favor after all. It was better to be unarmed than to have a weapon offered you and be afraid to grasp it. It was better to cry for something to do than be offered it and see yourself shrink.

Well, at least, she thought grimly, no more moaning and groaning, no more complaint that I'm lost and chartless. I'm not falling through space; no more excuses. I know what I ought to do, and I can't do it. And now, if I want to live at all, I'll have to learn to live with a coward.

She glanced up at a clock in a store window. Twenty after twelve. She looked at a street sign. Corner of Avenida Gabriel Leyva and Calle de los Zapateros. She wanted to remember the exact time and place at which she first deliberately applied that word to herself.

Odd. Now that she had said it, it seemed quite natural and fitting. Almost pleasant. As if, having uttered that word, all her troubles ranged themselves in order, unsolved but identified. She felt like an invalid somewhat relieved merely to learn the name of his affliction.

And now that she had said it, it was startlingly plain that it had been true all her life. I never seriously believed it before, she thought. I've often been afraid, but everyone's afraid a good deal of the time. Now, though, I know that fear is stronger in me than conscience or will. Than anything.

Oh, she could remember others calling her a coward before now. Jack had said it often. But it had never really penetrated or bothered her because it had no referent, no sounding board in her belief. And even her father, sometimes jokingly, sometimes reprovingly, used to call her Muchafraid, after Mr. Despondency's daughter in Pilgrim's Progress. But that, too, never really meant more to her than a surface gibe, a loving pinch, not an indictment. You have to believe the fault to accept the censure.

Well, it had been there all along. She saw that now. For instance, the whole affair with Jack. . . . For some inexplicable reason, one of those strange chemical-mystical disaffinities which seem ineradicable, her father had taken an instant dislike to Jack when they met; so Jack had been forced in time, in self-defense, to dislike her father. It was out of fear of her father's reaction more than for any other reason that she hadn't got married while she was still in college. Then after Jack had gone out West and importuned her to follow him, while she was summoning up the strength to go to him against her father's wishes, the news had come of his death. And she could remember now, shamefully clear, mingled with the shock and tears, a secretest dram of relief. The Gordian knot cut. The problem removed, not solved.

And other instances, of varying importance, came tumbling back: the offer to teach in Istanbul, the political rally at college, oh, even the time in high school when she was the only one who knew which boy had stolen the teacher's pocket-book; big things, trivial things, all strung together on one thread, one thin, strong, endless fact.

So it wasn't that she had suddenly lost heart or weakened. There had been no change. All that had happened now was that the fact, long buried, had been disinterred. At last, after the accrued equivocations of years, a final inescapable brutal circumstance had smashed the fact into her conscious mind, branded it inescapably behind her eyes, so

that now on this beautiful warm day as she walked these streets and looked at people, places, colors, she saw them all quite differently, through the corrective prism of the newly realized fact.

Later that afternoon, after resting a bit in a park, she came to a vaudeville theater. For no reason that she could think of, sheerly out of impulse or out of a curious desire to simulate impulse, she bought a ticket and went in.

The theater was crowded but not uncomfortable. Along one side of the orchestra, set back in an open foyer, was a bar at which people stood and drank while they watched the performance. On the stage a tall blonde girl was doing cartwheels and Arabian tinsecas in a very short skirt and skater's pants. Eleanor took her seat in the middle of a row and glanced at her program: "Señorita Betty Benson—Notable Bailarina Acrobatica Norteamericana." She found this type of act as vaguely irritating in Mexico as anywhere else and was relieved when it was finished. There were cheers and many whistles for the blonde, who came out for three bows, flipping her skirt up behind her each time as she left.

Then the curtain rose on a crudely painted set representing a doctor's office. A sketch began, involving a doctor, a buxom nurse, a man, and his friend—the last obviously a great favorite with the audience, a short comedian with innocent eyebrows and an oversize raincoat. The laughter rippled almost with the rise of the curtain and exploded in a roar whenever the little man turned to the audience and made a wry comment or expressed bewilderment; and as he had been given lines at evenly spaced intervals, the crowd's outbursts developed a kind of rhythm.

Eleanor of course didn't understand a word. At first and briefly, this was annoying, even though she wasn't deeply interested in what they said; it was simply a reflex annoyance at being excluded. But as the play continued and as

the people around her laughed and chuckled and shook their heads smilingly and made humorously deprecatory noises, she began to feel wonderfully soothed; she was in the middle of warmth, sharing it without having to contribute to it, partaking without responsibility. The people all around her took their cues from the stage and made the dim theater a snug, warm cave, with a coziness that comforted her as well as them but without obligating or involving her. The bond of reciprocity between speaker and hearer did not apply to her. It was a paradoxically close and aloof feeling; to be securely contained in the group with none of its responsibility.

The strange words on the stage polarized an eager magnetic sea out of the audience; past her and over her this contiguous swirling stream flowed. And in the center of it, a quiet island, her mind—bulwarked and protected by incomprehension—felt at ease, stretched in the middle of the audience's glow like a cat before a fire. And, like a warm protected cat, it turned back on itself in self-examination.

I sit here, she thought, and there's a man with big mustaches on my left and a stout lady on my right and they're the same as they were this morning, all these people are. The world hasn't changed for them; day or night, their world either faces the sun or expects it. . . . It's changed for me; and today—in the early hours—I finally found out why.

. . . Because there was something in her stronger than will, stronger than her knowledge of what she ought to do. Something that fled from rigor, back to dark warm moist obscurity. Something that didn't dare to step forward, to leave the herd, something that antedated the soul.

Just as there was a force in her that fought to keep her body safe from physical danger, there was a force in her that fought her moral sense when it pointed toward social danger. And, she knew now, the issue that made or unmade

you was whether you allowed those forces to rule you in spite of the mind's beliefs.

Her present life, Heaven knew, wasn't much; but something in her had won the fight to keep it safe. Even a doomed man, incurably sick, leaped back from in front of a speeding car. Now, almost as automatically, she shrank from anomaly, from defiance of the world's acceptances. Although she had little to cling to, this power made her cling to it; and she told herself (disbelieving it even as she thought it) that if it weren't for involving her father's name she might have risked returning home and telling the truth. If it weren't for this or that or the other. . . .

With a roar of laughter, the curtain came down on the nurse's fainting in the comedian's arms. Delirium, curtain calls, kisses blown. Then a pomaded tenor. Then a bald ventriloquist with a red-nosed dummy: "Chucho Sotomayor!! El Mejor Ventrilocuo del Mundo!!!" Usual impertinence of dummy to ventriloquist. Sly remarks from audience. Squelching of heckler by dummy to intense delight of all.

The laughter, although it was only theater laughter quarried out with synthetic jokes, helped to wash the lugubriousness out of her and allowed her to consider matters calmly. . . . It was essentially a question of comfort, she thought. It was simply easier not to go back and do it. That was all. That was what cowardice—physical or moral—amounted to, in fine. Both of them were rooted in the ego and both of them clamored for comfort: one for the body's sake, the other for the person's.

. . . She caught the words "presidente" and "policía" from the dummy. The audience emitted a shocked but amused gasp en masse, then burst into laughter and applause. . . .

Well, what was left? If now, in the depths, she didn't dare to forsake the very protection of those depths, what was left for her? If the only perceptible way out was through this

action which she knew she couldn't perform, then what was left? Objectively, judiciously, as if her life had been presented to her by someone else for consideration, she wondered where she would be in six months, a year, two years. There was a strange wicked tingle in thinking about it, in knowing that life—the prized, the desperately cherished of everyone else—for instance of everyone here in this place around her—meant so little to her and could be weighed dispassionately. She felt spendthrift and reckless: like an outlaw who has nothing more to lose no matter what he does. Too tired now for tears, she wondered calmly what would happen. Would she ever feel different? Could anything, even with time's help, restore the fractured firmament?

The ventriloquist was followed by a pair of adagio dancers ("Carmen y Schilinsky . . . Buenos . . . Nuevos . . . Unicos"). Now the show had left the happy incomprehensible and included her in its audience; there was no barrier of language to protect her now. She got up, sidled across, and made her way out of the auditorium.

In the lobby she stopped in front of a mirror to touch her hair and was surprised to see herself actually there, reflected in the setting of this garish dirty-gilt lobby. She would have been much less surprised if the mirror hadn't reflected her at all. As she was about to go, two smiling young gold-toothed bucks came up, extremely close, and made some soft-voiced comments. She turned on them a look of such blank disinterestedness that they giggled nervously, glanced worriedly at each other, and stepped aside.

She headed back in what she hoped was the direction of the hotel. The low late-afternoon sun glared directly into her eyes and, after the theater, gave her a headache. She had gone about two blocks, picking her way precariously through the demoniac traffic, when she heard a horn tooting madly across the street. It was Teodoro, slowing down his car and

pulling up to the curb on the other side. He waved to her and she went over.

"Hey, Miss Eleanor," he said, "we been lookin' all over for you. Señor Roy, he called your room I bet twenty times already."

"I've been out all day, Teodoro. What was it about?"

"Señor he's going down to Huapango tomorrow. That's down south. I'm going to drive him. He wants to talk to you first."

"Oh. Well, I'll probably see him back at the hotel."

"You going back there now, I can take you."

"But you were headed the other way."

He grinned. "My wife keeps dinner another ten minutes, what's the difference? Teach her not to be too sure about me. And she don't have it good and hot, I give her a sock anyway." He opened the door. "Come on, señorita. You get in."

That morning Roy had asked Peerless's local manager to find out what government water-power projects had been under construction five to six years before. The manager had a cousin in a government office, which didn't surprise Roy since even the poorest Mexican seemed rich in cousins. This particular cousin reported back that there had been only one such government project at that time: at a place in the south called Huapango.

Roy was greatly encouraged by this; it narrowed the field down considerably. Indeed, the field couldn't be much further narrowed without becoming nonexistent. His first impulse was to wire a request for information to Huapango—it was a state hydroelectric station now and had direct telegraph service—but he didn't like shooting off a telegram into the dark. The safest and most direct way was to go down there himself, to be able to see the man to whom he talked. This Seastrom search had taken on an aspect which made

it advisable to be on the spot so that you could gauge something about the man you questioned. Besides, if Seastrom was still there, then Roy could settle his business quickly.

He wired the studio that Patzcuaro had proved a fizzle but that he had a lead down south which he was following up at once.

The events at Patzcuaro had hung in Roy's consciousness like a tenacious vapor. The bare bones of the matter were intriguing enough in themselves, but in addition he sensed an overlay, an aura of troubled spirit. Tod's evasion and his blunt silencing of Alabam hinted at something more than the fact that Seastrom had once drunkenly attacked an old farmer. Lucas hadn't hit his wife to prevent her talking about that; for one thing, the cat was already out of the bag. He had done it when she began to talk about the plane, when she'd said that Seastrom wanted to forget the plane.

Maybe the torrent of adulation that the flight had showered on him had ruined the poor fellow: similar things happened often enough to picture people. He was haunted by a sense of tragic deterioration after the event. It was like seeing two photographs taken fifteen years apart, the second ravaged by more than time. It posed a problem in a special arithmetic, trying to subtract the first photograph from the second to find out what had happened in the interim.

Well, whatever it was, it was really none of his business. His only job was to find the man if he could, alive or dead or half alive.

He spoke to Teodoro when the driver came back, bored, from a trip to the floating gardens at Xochimilco. When Roy said the word 'Huapango,' Teodoro's face lighted up. "Now you talkin'. Now you gonna see something beautiful down there, Señor Roy. You going into the Orizaba Valley."

"Well, it's just an extra bonus. I'm not going for the view. How far is it to Huapango?"

"Let's see, over near Córdoba. I say about three hun-

dred and fifty kilometers. That's—uh," he figured rapidly, "about two hundred miles. About the same like Patzcuaro but easier driving most of the way. Make it in a day easy if we start early."

"Can you take me tomorrow?"

"You bet." And then with extra seriousness to make doubly certain that there was no smile on his face, "Say, uh, Señor Roy, is the señorita coming, Miss Eleanor?"

"I'll find that out as soon as I can." He caught Teodoro's eye. "Wise guy."

The driver laughed. Sure was one funny fellow.

Teodoro left for home after setting their starting time in the morning. Now he called from the lobby to report that he'd just brought Eleanor in.

Roy rang her room. "I tried to get you earlier," he said. "I'd like to talk to you."

"Well, I—I'm quite tired, Roy."

"Yes, Teodoro told me you'd done a lot of walking today. Why don't you have yourself a little nap—let's see, it's almost six—suppose I call for you about eight and take you to dinner."

"I don't think I'll want any dinner."

"Oh."

After a moment—not immediately, as if she were anxious not to displease him, but soon enough so that he knew she hadn't meant to be abrupt—she said, "Roy, I hope you won't think me rude. This, everything—I know you're being kind, I appreciate it. I just mean what I say; I won't be having dinner."

"Sure, I understand." He didn't understand; he was merely prepared for her to do things which he didn't understand. "Well, could I come up and see you later? I do want to talk to you. Unless you have another appointment?"

"No."

"Then may I come up around eight or so?"

"Well, Roy, there's really no—" A pause. "If you want to, Roy."

"See you at eight," he said.

She took off her shoes and dress and stretched out on the bed. Roy really was kind. What a pity that his kindness meant so little to her. All she could respond with was a weak gratitude and not a great deal of that.

She knew what he was going to ask: whether she cared to go with him to Huapango. So she might as well consider her answer now. . . . The same reason still applied that had impelled her to make the first trip. She still desperately needed any kind of diversion, anything to keep her mind at least partly occupied. And now there were two further reasons. As much as she could be interested in anything, she was interested in Seastrom; the Lucases—Alabam with her naked voice and Tod with his calm but frightened blow—had seen to that. And also, since now she was cut off from any hope of finding a destination of her own, she was willing to share someone else's—temporarily, at any rate. It was narcotizing and self-deluding, but it was consciously self-deluding, and it was the closest she could come to a facsimile of purpose.

She lay there about an hour and succeeded, if not in sleeping, at least in hiding from most of her memory for a while. Then she got up and wrote Aunt Julia a brief note. She said the future wasn't clear. Her health was no worse, but she couldn't even think of returning to New Gilead just now. Would Aunt Julia kindly tell the Andrews School that they'd better find another teacher?

She folded the note and stroked the paper, thinking that in two days it would be back home; and she was aware at last that her refuge, her fortress, was cut off from her; that for the first time in her life there was no place to which she could retreat.

Shortly after eight Roy knocked at the door. He had prepared a little joke about Prince Charming and the Sleeping Beauty, but when he saw her face he abandoned it.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Yes, of course."

He looked past her at the room. Nothing definably wrong with it, but it had a funny, charged feeling. "Or better still, why don't you come out? Why don't we go over to the park—Chapultepec Park? I passed by it today—it's beautiful. It's only a few minutes by cab."

She could never object strongly to leaving this room, although she knew that this had nothing to do with the room itself; she would have hated any room she was in and would have hoped for excuses to leave it. "All right, Roy."

In Chapultepec Park tall columnar trees grew, spreading out into boughs only far up near their tops, thus rendering the park beneath a kind of leaf-roofed pergola. They strolled quietly in the moonlight for a while, relishing the unworldly shimmering feeling of the place ("Debussy" was Roy's comment). Then they sat on a bench.

"You're sure you're not hungry?" he asked.

"No. Maybe you can get me a sandwich later."

He told her what he'd found out that day about Huapango and, almost without hesitation, he invited her to come along with him. Almost without hesitation, she accepted.

"Well!" he said heartily. "That's fine. I hoped you'd come, but I didn't think you'd accept so quickly. That's fine." Then he asked, "What made you decide so quickly?"

"Oh," she shrugged, "Teodoro hinted at what you wanted to talk about, so I thought it over beforehand. I thought I'd like to find out what happened to Seastrom. Possibly to actually see what happened. Roy," she said, "at the end there, when Alabam was crying, really crying, did you have a feeling—that—that something terrible may have happened to him?"

"Well, she certainly convinced me that he's no longer the Boy Hero. And from her husband I got the impression that wherever Seastrom is now, there are people interested in seeing that he stays there." He shook his head. "Can't help wondering what drove him wild. I read over Lucas's book, and even if you discount ninety per cent of it as publicity hogwash, there's still a pretty clear picture of a clean-cut kid. Wonder what happened to him by the time he hit Patzcuaro, in those intervening—let's see—nine years."

"That's what I mean, Roy." Eleanor nodded. "In her voice when she was telling you to leave him alone, there was a sound as if something had driven him crazy. Oh, the actual cause of it might be anything at all—maybe his pet dog died—but the effect—the kind of thing that happens to people—that—that hollows them out . . ."

"Yes. I'd been thinking something like that myself. Well," he said, "that's why you want to come along with me, eh? To find out whether your premonition is accurate?"

Her head inclined a little to one side. "As much as anything, that's why. To see what happens to heroes."

He sighed. "Just as long as you want to come. And who knows, maybe tomorrow night this time you'll have your answer. Maybe we'll be sitting across the table from the Kid Himself."

"Maybe." Neither of them sounded especially convinced.

"Well," he said, "like I say. As long as you want to come."

She frowned slightly. "Roy, I still don't see why you want—"

"Oh, for God's sake!" he interrupted with affectionate impatience. "I'm not going through all that again. I told you the first time that I didn't know exactly why and I still don't. But I liked having you along on the Patzcuaro trip, and I'm asking you again. That's all."

"Thank you, Roy," she said. She touched his hand. "Really. Thank you very much. I wish . . ." The sentence vanished.

After a moment she glanced up through the tall trees at the luminous sky. "It really is—unreal here, isn't it?"

Roy thought that something about the way she said that, the way she looked in the pale green-silver light, was heart-breaking.

"Eleanor, if there was ever anything I could do to help you—in any way—you'd let me know, wouldn't you?"

"There couldn't be anything. But if there were, yes, thanks, Roy."

CHAPTER SEVEN

*T*he village of Huapango lay in a long deep canyon which in turn was in the huge Orizaba Valley. A river ran through the bottom of the canyon, led in by a cataract at one end; abutting the cataract was the hydroelectric plant. Before the construction of the plant, there had been only a few Indian huts along the water's edge in the canyon; but the influx of workers, both builders and maintainers, had caused a reasonably clean new adobe and wood village to accrete to the nucleus of huts.

The canyon walls were so precipitous that there was no road into the village. Special cable elevators had been erected for the transportation of supplies during the construction days; those had since been dismantled. Now the only way in or out was via a cable car which climbed and descended the slope of a fifty-degree hill.

It was wildly gorgeous country—clad in a thick green color fantastically dappled with flowers. As Teodoro eased the car like a shying horse down the zigzag road into the Orizaba Valley, the lush, embracing, tropical air slipped up around them, dispelling the chill of the heights. Soon they

sped through the wide warm valley toward the entrance to Huapango, past trees hung with orchid vines; flamy bougainvillea; short palms, tall palms; and fence posts that had actually taken root and sprouted in this incredibly fertile soil.

"You ever see anything like that, señor?" asked Teodoro, pointing to the fence posts. "Bet you don't believe it if you don't see it with your own eyes. You think it's like something in one of those baloney books."

This was a reference to something that had been discussed on the trip down. Roy had steered the conversation around to the matter of his New York offer and Eleanor had listened attentively. He had presented his problem pretty much as he had rehearsed it in dream conversations; and he felt that he, too, had staked a reasonably good claim to be considered complex and troubled, that he had shown his credentials entitling him to be considered of her rank and maturity. When he had finished, Teodoro had asked, "Señor, what kind of books that company prints in New York? About real things?" "Well, yes," he'd answered, "about real things, but made-up stories too. That's where I've had most of my experience, with fiction." "Oh," Teodoro had nodded knowingly, "baloney books."

"Tomorrow morning," Teodoro said now, "we're lucky, we see Mount Orizaba over there. Third biggest mountain in North America. With snow on the top, and you see it through palm trees. You got to see it early because most of the day there's always clouds around the top."

They turned off the main highway onto a side road that led through a wood. Low-hanging branches brushed the top and sides of the sedan as the road narrowed. At last they came to the cable house of the car that ran down the hill to Huapango. The black-greased, surprisingly thin cable ran out of the other side of the house over steel rollers to the car tracks and the brink of the hill.

They parked the sedan in a shed and walked to the precipice. Far down below was the village, on the banks of a wrought-metal river. Beyond it, at the head of the valley, was the thistledown cataract and the white concrete power plant with transmission towers climbing away from it up the steep slope of the far hill.

"Well," said Roy, "there it is. And maybe he's there."

Teodoro had gone over to speak to a mechanic outside the cable house and reported to Roy. "He says the car is down at the bottom and it's not supposed to come back for about an hour." Roy grimaced with impatience. "But you give one of those kids a peso, he goes down and tells them to hurry up, there's passengers waiting." He indicated a couple of barefoot boys who were lounging in the grass nearby staring at the visitors, tittering and digging each other's ribs with their elbows.

"Goes down!" exclaimed Roy, glancing over the edge. The tracks swooped below and away like an amusement park scenic railway. "How? By parachute?"

Teodoro laughed loudly. "Parachute!" he repeated, as if it were the best joke in the world. "No, you give me a peso, Señor Roy, and I show you." Teodoro liked to retain a touch of mystery in his operations, explaining as little as possible and merely producing results. He liked to create an air of taciturn competence. It was quite harmless, because he did produce results.

The peso was offered, and Teodoro waved at one of the boys, who jumped to his feet and ran to Teodoro's side in, seemingly, one swift blurred movement. The boy had a large flat square of tin in his hand. Teodoro gave him the money; the boy nodded quickly and went to the top of the slope. He put the flat tin on one of the rails, sat on it, then gave himself a shove over the edge, lifted his feet, too, onto the tin, and sped down like a monorail car, using his wide-spread arms as balances. He went out of sight under the slope

and, minutes later, reappeared where the tracks bulged out for a moment in a brief level stretch before they plummeted down again. He whisked along at a terrific pace, then disappeared swiftly among the trees of the lower slope.

"Er," said Roy, his eyebrows raised, "I see."

Soon the great wheel in the cable house began to turn and the greased cable slipped back along its rollers. In a little while the car came into sight, and with a contempt for gravity that was amazing even with the cause evident it crawled up the sheer slope. When it reached the top, it discharged a few passengers and some freight. Roy and Eleanor and Teodoro got in and sat on one of the crosswise, sharply angled seats. Then the car rolled over the edge and down the hill, touching earth on the side but not the bottom.

It felt as if they had shot off a cliff into space and were falling infinitely slowly—as if time had been miraculously stretched so that the fall that ought to have taken fifteen seconds would take fifteen minutes and would therefore be safe.

Halfway down the hill, as the summit from which they had imperially surveyed the village gradually reared above them, Roy began to laugh.

"What's the matter?" asked Eleanor.

"I was just thinking," he grinned. "Wendell Shafer's daughter. Gorblimey."

Huapango was even warmer and more luxuriant than the country above. Bananas hung thickly from palms, there were orange trees and coconuts, coffee and cane; and flowers in profusion. When they stepped out of the car a pretty little Indian girl handed each of them a lei of white gardenias.

"Holy smoke," murmured Roy, sniffing them, "home and Hollywood Boulevard were never like this. Shall I give her something, Teodoro?"

He shrugged. "A few centavos. They don't cost her nothing, señor." Teodoro, although not stingy with other people's money, took an odd pride in seeing that his countrymen were not overpaid.

At the little depot he spoke to a man, who left and quickly returned with a reasonably reputable-looking touring car. "Where to, señor?" asked Teodoro.

"I suppose we'd better see the personnel director of the power plant." Teodoro didn't move. "The man in charge of hiring all the workmen," said Roy.

Teodoro's face came alive; he spoke to the driver. Then they climbed in and moved across the floor of the valley, through the village out toward the cataract and its leechlike power plant.

"Imagine," said Eleanor, "working next to a waterfall."

"Yes," nodded Roy, "very Currier and Ives. I'm just wondering about something."

"What's that?"

"Well, according to what that maid Frasca told us, Lucas got Seastrom a job down here right away. Assuming that this is the place. So Tod must have an ear or two he can reach when he needs to."

"He's been living in Mexico a long time."

"So have a lot of Mexicans who couldn't operate that smoothly. Well," he rubbed his chin, "one of the first rules of modern life is that you can never tell who an old newspaperman may know. I suppose he pulled a string he had left over from his Tennant days." In a moment he continued: "But it must have been quite a string; to hush up that fight and get in touch with this place and fix the job so quickly. Sounds a little as if he had a helping hand, someone else who was interested in Seastrom. Y'know, Eleanor, if we don't latch on to Seastrom ourselves, I'm going to suggest that the studio's investigators give Mr. Lucas—before and after Mexico—a fine-tooth combing."

They drove through the open gates in the wall surrounding the plant, up a gently inclined gravel road to the administration building. At Roy's request, Teodoro told their chauffeur to wait. The guide asked a few questions at the first door they came to, and soon they were knocking at another door lettered "J. M. Reyes" with a few Spanish words under it. Teodoro translated in a whisper: "Assistant Director in Charge of—er—the workers—the people who work here—what?"

"Personnel," whispered Roy.

A secretary addressed them courteously and Teodoro explained that they would like to see her superior. Roy supplemented the request by giving the girl his card. She took it inside, and in a minute they were ushered into the inner office.

"Jesús Maria Reyes" was the inscription on the plaque on the director's desk. He rose as they entered; a tall, broad man with a ballooned stomach and a swarthy fleshy face without jowls. He had small puffy hands with a diamond ring on the little finger of each, and he had small feet on which, as he came forward to greet them, he moved lightly and gracefully.

"Buenos días," said Roy and Eleanor, and Teodoro took it up from there. They were invited to sit and were offered cigarettes; and Teodoro, who had been coached by Roy on the way down from Mexico City in case the man they saw had no English, attacked his job with energy. Señor Reyes listened attentively and murmured an occasional "Sí" to indicate that he was grasping the matter. Then Teodoro mentioned the word "Seastrom" and Señor Reyes cocked his head to one side, seeming to look at Teodoro through a knothole.

He stroked his big round cheek with his little round fingers and looked thoughtful. Then he cocked his head from side to side—evidently his way of shaking it negatively—and replied.

Teodoro said, "He says he don't remember any man named Seastrom."

"Was Señor Reyes here five years ago?" asked Roy.

"Yes, he was right here from the beginning."

"Did you explain that if I find him, it'll be to Seastrom's advantage?"

"Yes. Just like you tol' me."

Roy looked at Eleanor. The disappointment was less this time because the expectation was less. It *had* been a thin chance.

Señor Reyes spoke again and pressed a buzzer. Teodoro said, "He says that he wants to make sure. It was a long time ago and they had a lot of fellers working here."

The secretary appeared, received an order and soon returned with a huge record book. Reyes ruffled through it to the page he wanted, scanned a list, scanned it again, then nodded briefly and sadly to indicate that he had been right. With a little staccato bow, he turned the book around and handed it to Roy, who said, "Gracias."

It was obviously the record of employees of five years before; this page was devoted to the S's. No Seastrom. No non-Spanish name of any kind on the page.

Reyes spoke again, through Teodoro. "He says he was pretty sure. They dint have many Americans working here on building the place and he was pretty sure he would remember."

Roy sighed and slapped the page. "Well," he said, "the ride down was beautiful."

"Roy," said Eleanor, "I don't want to interfere . . ."

He looked at her in simple delighted surprise that she cared to say anything at all of her own volition. "What is it, Eleanor? Go ahead."

"It's only that it occurred to me: if he were hiding down here, mightn't he have changed his name?" She had found herself thinking of what she might have done in

Seastrom's place. It hadn't been hard to imagine herself fleeing.

"That's true," nodded Roy quickly, "he may have. That hadn't occurred to me. Still," he frowned, "that doesn't help us much. How do we know what he changed it to?"

"We don't, of course," she admitted.

"I'm afraid this thing is getting to be exactly what I feared—a needle-in-the-haystack proposition. However—Teodoro," he said, "ask Señor Reyes whether there are any Americans working here now." The answer was "no."

Reyes expressed his regret that he wasn't able to be of more assistance to them. They had traveled such a great distance and Señor Anderson was the representative of such a well-known firm in Mexico; Reyes would have been delighted to help. However, if they would do him the honor, he would be most happy to take them on a tour of the plant and then to his home near-by for refreshment. He hoped they would permit him the honor of presenting his wife and children.

The translation finished, the big man rose to his feet with that surprising grace of his.

Eleanor said, "Roy, what was the name of Seastrom's plane?"

"The Western Victory."

"Well, here." She had been leafing casually through the pages of the record book; she pointed now to a name on another page. West, Victor. A man who had come to work here five years ago and had stayed about a year.

"It caught my eye, backwards like that," she said. "Do you think it means anything?"

Victor West. A wild chance.

"No," he replied, "not really. But as long as we're here, we might as well find out. Teodoro, ask Señor Reyes what he knows about a man named Victor West."

Then Roy glanced at Reyes and, with a sudden little

shiver, he noticed that the man was staring at him fixedly. Teodoro asked his question, listened to the reply, and said, "He don't remember him, señor. It was five years ago and there was so many workers."

"But he said there weren't many Americans. West is an American or English name." Was he imagining it or had the big man's neck become slightly rigid? "If there were so few foreigners, he might remember this one. Ask him, if I described a man, would he be able to tell me whether he resembled this Victor West."

In a moment Teodoro replied, "He says it was too long ago. And he didn't have much to do right with the men. He says he don't even know whether he akchally met this here West. He says he's sorry, but you better start your tour of the plant before it gets dark."

"Mm-hm," nodded Roy judiciously. The man was still staring at him. His brown color had taken on an almost translucent quality, as if paleness underneath were showing through. "Ask him whether he'll be good enough to wait just one minute." It was asked. "Teodoro, read this, will you? Tell me what it says." He indicated the entry next to West's name.

"Well," said Teodoro, "it says that this here West fellow, he was in the gang that worked with a man named Keen. No, you say it 'Quinn.' That's right, Quinn. Well, he was in this here Quinn's bunch, working under him. And it says he lived in this here Quinn's house. Then he quit. Don't say where he went."

"Teodoro," said Roy, "ask him whether Quinn still works here."

The question was put.

Reyes bit his lower lip. He stared at Roy. Than he said quietly, "Sí."

Roy said to Eleanor, "Chubby did a lot of fast thinking just then. Decided to short-cut a lot of questions and answers.

He knows we could find out about Quinn anyway. But I don't think he's very happy about all this."

"Even his diamonds aren't sparkling so much," said Eleanor.

"God," muttered Roy, "what's it about? *Why* is everyone trying to stall us? Why don't they want us to find Seastrom?"

"If Victor West is Seastrom."

"If he isn't," said Roy, looking back to Reyes, "I've got a hunch that he knows something about him."

Reyes asked a question. Teodoro said, "He says if you want to see the plant, we really got to start soon. Pronto."

"Tell him many thanks," answered Roy, "but we'll have to put it off until another time. Tell him we'd like to speak to this man Quinn. We'd appreciate it if he'd let us know where we can find him."

Teodoro conveyed it; again there was a long pause and again the big man's eyes were riveted on Roy's face. Roy returned the stare steadily and could very nearly see the questions forming and being answered in the big man's head. Reyes evidently concluded once more that delay would not really serve any purpose. He spoke.

"This here Quinn is home by now, he says," Teodoro translated. "He has a house in the village. Everybody knows it. He's surely there by now. Reyes he's positive."

They rose. "Give Señor Reyes my sincere thanks for his courtesy and co-operation," said Roy. "I don't know whether I'm any closer to the man I'm looking for, but in any event I'm very grateful for his time."

The message was delivered with punctilio. With equal punctilio they all bowed. As the visitors left the room, the big man went back to the chair behind the desk; but something had changed. He no longer moved with grace. The lightness of foot had gone.

As they walked down the corridor, Roy said, "Well,

we may not have found the needle, but something tells me that this is the haystack."

Teodoro spoke to their driver, who recognized Quinn's name at once and knew his house; the village was too small for it to be otherwise. Long shadows were falling as they drove back down the valley, as if, after the day's business, shutters were being drawn for the night.

Roy felt exhilarated, and it took only the roughest self-analysis to show him what his exhilaration was made up of: equal parts of encouragement about Seastrom and excitement at the fact that Eleanor had made a contribution to the cause. Had, as a matter of fact, suggested something which hadn't even occurred to him. Maybe the apprehension that she had spoken of last night—that Seastrom had suffered some soul-ravaging experience—had quickened her interest and imagination, given her a kind of identifying insight.

"Thank you, Eleanor," he said. "For thinking about the name business."

"I didn't really think of it, Roy. If you know what I mean. I wasn't trying to think of anything; it simply happened. And it simply happened that I saw the name on the other page."

"Well, I hope things like that keep on simply happening. I wish you'd sort of—well, feel free to make any suggestions you care to." He wished that she would do or say anything to involve her further in this affair, to join herself more closely with him. Every minute they spent together, every word she said, was another link that bound them, and made him feel that something which he wanted to grow was growing.

"All right, Roy. But don't let it deceive you. It was only an accident. I'm not very clever about these things."

"Then just stay as dumb as you are." She smiled. "Gosh, you wouldn't have thought it, Eleanor. All this fuss just to find a man for a movie. You'd think we were looking for the Lost Dauphin or Ambrose Bierce or something. And when I started the other day I thought it was going to be a day's business. Now, just as much as finding the guy, I'd like to find out why so many people don't *want* us to find him."

"Reyes was frightened, I thought."

"Scared stiff. He sent for that book to kiss us off with it, but when you thought of what you thought of he was scared stiff. Damnedest thing."

Quinn's house was on a narrow street, barely wide enough for the automobile. Like a great many Mexican houses, the street side was merely an adobe wall with a door and a few small windows; the interesting part of the house was within, centering around the patio. They dismissed the driver, since they were within walking distance of the cable depot, and Teodoro knocked. A barefoot maid answered and in a moment returned with a very pregnant native woman who had a child of about two in her arms. Teodoro explained that they wanted to see Señor Quinn and the woman invited them in.

"This here is Señora Quinn. She says her husband ain't home from work yet. But if we want to come in and wait, she sends the maid for him."

Roy said "Muchas gracias" to the woman, who replied "De nada" and gestured for them to follow her. On the way down the hall, they met the maid, whom Señora Quinn dispatched for her husband.

They were shown across a small patio which had its own banana palm and many potted plants, then into a small, cool sitting room full of modern furniture—low and comfortable, upholstered with gray towelike material and with red piping along the edges.

"Well, well," said Roy. "It's like stepping out of Mexico into the Men's Room at the Roxy." To Señora Quinn he said, straining his vocabulary to the utmost, "Muy bonito."

She nodded and blushed a little. Evidently this suite of furniture was her caste mark in the village and she was happy to have it remarked upon. She was also both a little frightened by this influx of visitors and highly curious; but, like a good Mexican wife, she would never dare to ask why they had come to see her husband.

On the wall, among the religious pictures and a reproduction of Orozco's "Zapatistas," hung a framed diploma. It was from a British engineering school and had been awarded to Justin Quinn some twenty-odd years before. "Ah," said Roy, "a little older than I thought. Don't know why but I expected a youngish man. Open-shirted, high-booted young American. Turns out he's in his forties and English."

Señora Quinn offered them cigarettes and drinks, which latter they declined. She wasn't going to presume to sit with them, and after a little bow disappeared into an inside room. Roy's fingers began to twitch impatiently after he'd finished his second cigarette, and Reyes's words came back to him. He remembered that the big man had told them emphatically that Quinn would be home now. "Teodoro," he said thoughtfully, "do me a favor. Just step inside and ask the lady what time her husband usually gets home from the plant."

Teodoro came back in a moment. "She says about an hour from now. She says she told the maid to tell him to come right away, but he don't usually get home for another hour."

"That's what I thought. Reyes said that he'd certainly be here by now. I think there is hugger-mugger."

"Qué, señor?"

"I think Reyes knew he wasn't going to be here. He wanted to speak to Quinn before we saw him."

"What we do?"

"Nothing we can do. We'll just have to be grateful for whatever leaks through after Reyes clams this guy up."

Before he had lighted another cigarette he saw the maid return breathless and a moment later the señora came in and spoke to Teodoro. She was evidently puzzled and apologetic.

"Señor Roy, she says they told the maid up at the plant that Señor Quinn had to go away sudden on business. He wouldn't even be home tonight. He goes to Tehuacán."

"Damn it!" Roy smote his palm with his fist. "Boy, that Reyes is really taking no chances. He must be even more scared than we thought."

"Yeah, looks like nobody expected Señor Quinn to make this here trip. His wife dint."

Roy rubbed the back of his neck angrily. Suddenly he stopped and snapped his fingers. "Teodoro, how many ways are there out of this valley?"

"Just the one, señor. The cable car."

"And we've only been here about twenty minutes. Maybe there's a chance—" He leaped to his feet and grabbed his hat. "Come on, Teodoro. Eleanor," he said, "will you wait here, please? We'll be back. Teodoro, tell the señora we'll be right back."

Teodoro called a few words over his shoulder to the surprised señora as he followed Roy across the patio toward the door. The señora turned bewilderedly to Eleanor, who sat in a corner of the room.

"It's all right," said Eleanor gently. "Don't be frightened. They just want to speak to your husband before he goes. Don't be frightened."

The woman nodded, possibly comprehending, and, still troubled, sat down to wait.

Roy and Teodoro hurried down the long narrow street, then across a wider, sunny street at the edge of the village and rounded the corner of the cable-car depot. The car was there, loading up. And Reyes was there too, standing next to the car with another man, a man almost as tall as he but lean and erect. When Reyes caught sight of Roy, he stopped talking and simply stared at him as he approached. There was no point in his trying to evade him or think of excuses. All he could do was wait, let Roy make the first move. He evidently meant to put up a show of stolidity; but his mouth worked a little.

"Hello, señor," said Roy casually, not overdoing the irony or anger. He felt the best results would come from letting Reyes anticipate a heavier blow. Reyes nodded, still fixing him with his eyes, expressing nothing.

Roy returned the gaze long enough to tell Reyes what he thought of him, then spoke to the other man. "I beg your pardon, but are you Mr. Quinn?"

The man glanced back at Reyes, then at Roy. "I am." Under his wide-brimmed pointed hat—much like the campaign hats of the First War—his ringleted iron-gray hair was visible. He had sunken bronze cheeks and a long chin. His form was spare and bony; and as his collar was open, two great hollows were visible on either side of his neck above the breastbone. He smoked a pipe, in itself somewhat unusual in Mexico.

"My name is Anderson, Roy Anderson. I'd like to speak to you for a couple of minutes, Mr. Quinn, if I may."

"Well, I'm just about to leave. My car's to go up in a minute or so." His voice was baritone and resonant and the words were edged with remnants of Irish music.

Not in his forties and English, thought Roy. In his fifties and Irish.

"It's rather urgent, Mr. Quinn, and it won't take long."

"Well, what is it, then? If you can make it quick."

Roy nodded at Reyes. "In Mr. Reyes's office today, we saw a record book saying that a man named Victor West worked in your crew here about five years ago."

"That's right, so he did."

"I'm looking for information about this man West, Mr. Quinn. It'd be of great use to me. Do you remember him at all? Could you possibly tell me what he looked like?"

The man took his pipe from his mouth, studied the bowl, and then looked back at Roy. "Yes, surely. For, besides being in my section, West was a friend of mine. He was a short man, about five feet seven, I would say. A thin little sparrow of a fellow. Fair hair, very fair. But above that, nothing special about his looks that I remember. Is that the man you mean?"

. . . Earl Seastrom, as all the world knew, was about six feet tall and broad-shouldered; and had dark-brown hair. "That Brown-Haired Hero of Mine," the song had said. . . .

The bustle in the little depot increased as the departure of the car came closer. Behind and around him Roy felt a swirl of movings, felt himself silhouetted against them in this man's eyes, like a fool outlined by his folly.

He looked at Reyes. Although the big man's expression hadn't altered much, it was easy to see that his face had relaxed, that inside he was smiling. That was all Roy needed. For one thing, he thought, if Quinn had just told the truth about West, then Reyes would never have had to worry in the first place. And this unsmiled smile on the fat man's face confirmed that Quinn had been lying.

"That's too bad," said Roy, "because that's not the description of the man I'm looking for. And it's too bad for him, too. Because it would have been greatly to his advantage. I don't believe I gave you my card, Mr. Quinn." He handed it to him.

Quinn read the card, then looked at Reyes, who said something in Spanish. Quinn turned to Roy. "Cards are

easily printed, mister. How do I know you're what you say you are?"

Roy smiled pleasantly. "Well, what difference does it make—if West really is five feet seven and fair-haired? Even if I'm lying, he hasn't lost anything, if that's what he really looks like." Quinn pursed his lips slightly. Roy continued blandly: "However, just to set your mind at rest." He showed Quinn his wallet, open to the studio pass with his photograph on it. "And here." The company envelope, addressed to him at the Mexico City hotel. "However, as I say, your friend West won't be out four or five thousand dollars—if he really looks the way you described him."

A little bell rang in the depot to signal the ascent of the car. An attendant came out and asked Quinn a question. The gaunt man peered at Roy, then at Reyes. Reyes said something to which Quinn replied curtly. Then to the car attendant Quinn said "No."

Reyes started to talk again but Quinn cut him off with a couple of words. Reyes's head quivered a few times, like a missile stopped short in flight. Then without looking at Roy he turned sharply and walked away. The car began to climb.

"He said you were from the police," said Quinn. "After all, West was my friend."

"Mr. Quinn, was West about six feet tall," asked Roy, "and did he have brown hair and brown eyes? And a short thin scar along his cheekbone?"

"His right cheekbone," said Quinn. "That damned liar Reyes, even if he is my brother-in-law." Almost angrily he asked, "And what is it a big movie company wants with West, anyway? What have they to do with a poor construction worker?"

"Mr. Quinn," said Roy, "if he's the man we're looking for, his name isn't West. He's Earl Seastrom, the famous aviator."

If there was anything at all in Quinn's face, it certainly wasn't surprise.

"Let's not be standing here and talking," he said. "Come along to my house. Is this man your friend?"

"Yes, excuse me," said Roy, taking Teodoro's arm, "this is Mr. de Lara, our driver." They shook hands. "We were waiting for you at your house. As a matter of fact, another member of our party is there now. Reyes sent us there."

"I see."

They crossed the wide street and struck up the narrow calle toward Quinn's house.

"I can tell you right off," said the Irishman, "that I don't know where West is. And that's straight. He left here four years ago. He left for the north, and I never heard from him again."

Well, that's a great help, thought Roy. All this chasing down streets and big dramatic scenes and that's all it adds up to. "Not a word? Nothing?"

"Just one postcard. From Hidalgia."

"That's a city up in the north part, Señor Roy," Teodoro put in helpfully.

"The man certainly moves around. Well, Mr. Quinn, do you have any idea where we might look in Hidalgia?"

Quinn shook his head, thinking. Then he raised his eyebrows. "You might try the hospitals. Not that the man's sick, so far as I know. I mean he might perhaps be working in one there."

"A hospital!" repeated Roy. "Why a hospital?"

"I could explain that to you," said Quinn, "but it would take a bit of telling."

"God, I don't mind," said Roy. "I'd like to hear. I'd like to hear all I can about him." With a hint of desperation, "I'd like to find out why all these odd things have been happening. I'd like to know, for instance, why Reyes lied to you about me."

"Oh, that. There's a few pesos in it for him, I suppose. He's a great man for the money. Though I don't know exactly who pays it to him."

"Well, if you could just tell me whatever you *do* know, Mr. Quinn, it would be a great help. If you can spare the time."

"I'll tell you what I can." He sounded as if he were defining strict limits. "As for time," he turned and looked up where the cable car was climbing in the high, hill-flooding sunset, "that's the last car for the day." With a minimum of enthusiasm, he said, "You'll have to have dinner with me and stay the night."

CHAPTER EIGHT

*O*n the way to the house, roughly rehearsing how he would introduce Eleanor to Quinn, Roy suddenly became aware of the interpretation an outsider might place on the fact that she was traveling with him. To correct that impression, he considered introducing her as a business associate. But then it occurred to him that she might think him unduly worried about something that didn't matter at all to her and that it might annoy her; so when the moment came, all he said was "This is Miss Shafer." Quinn nodded inscrutably; Eleanor said, "An unexpected pleasure, Mr. Quinn," and gave Roy a little look that was close to admiration.

After Quinn excused himself and went upstairs, Roy told Eleanor what had happened. When they gathered again for dinner, their host handed Roy a postcard. "I just searched this out. This is all I have."

The card was dated nearly four years ago and had been mailed from Hidalgo. It was addressed to Quinn and said: "Have found work here and things look better. Am on the way, I think. Thanks for everything and good luck always. Victor West." There was no return address. On the back

was a picture of the Cathedral of San Salvador in Hidalgo.

Roy showed it to Eleanor, who read it and said, "You've never heard from him since, Mr. Quinn?"

"Nor from anyone who's seen him." He opened a door. "It's dinnertime now, if you please."

Señora Quinn didn't dine with them. However, Eleanor felt it was not because Quinn was in any way ashamed of her but because, since she didn't speak English, she would only hamper the conversation. Indeed, it was evident, as the señora helped the maid to wait on them, that Quinn was quite fond of her in a somewhat fatherly way and that she worshiped him. ("It's three years I've been married," he said. "It's ten years I've been a naturalized Mexican.") Quinn sat at the head of the table in a room that opened on the patio; Eleanor and Roy sat on either side of him and Teodoro sat at the foot of the table, eating with his almost truculent slowness and listening respectfully.

While the soup came and went, Roy allowed the conversation to go back and bow to the amenities that had been by-passed earlier (how long they'd been in Mexico, how long *he'd* been in Mexico, and so forth). Then he took a firm stand.

"To return to Victor West," said Roy, as chicken and rice were set before him. The sharp glance from Quinn told him that West had never been far away from the other man's thoughts either. "Even if you don't know where he is, Mr. Quinn, anything you tell us might give us a lead to follow up. Besides, we're very interested in the man himself and why there's all this hush-hush about him."

Quinn waved his hand and looked glum. "I can't tell you any of that, whatever it is you mean by it. I can tell you only what I know. And not even all of that. Because it's not all mine to tell." He stared moodily at his plate for a moment. "You're sure it's to West's good that you find him?"

"If money is good," shrugged Roy. "There's a considerable sum of money in it for him."

In a moment Quinn said, still staring at his plate, "Well, I've no call to make decisions for him. Perhaps he'd want the money, I don't know." He lifted his eyes. "What is it you want to hear?"

"All you can tell."

"From the beginning?"

"From the beginning."

"Except that I can't say how it began," said Quinn quietly. Then, after another pause, he began to talk, without halt or hesitation but with a color of reluctance, as if, although there was reason enough for talking, he still felt garrulous and uneasy.

"He came to work here about five years ago. We were building the plant then, and he was assigned to my crew. And to speak the truth, when I saw him first, I didn't much want him. But I was the only foreman who needed a man and we'd had orders to hire him, so it was me that was stuck with him."

"Orders from whom?" Roy inquired.

"I asked that myself, and Jesús—Señor Reyes—only shrugged and said that was how things went once in a while, on a government job especially. I never heard anything more definite than that. So I took him on, little thinking from the look of him that he'd ever be any friend of mine."

"What was wrong with him?"

"He'd a loose mouth and a shaky hand and he looked as if he'd been living the life, that boyo. You see, it was dirty work we were doing then, up above the falls, and a man had to be sure, and he had to be sure that the man next to him was sure. Well, I was right about him; he was not much good at all. I didn't like him. And he knew it, and didn't like me."

"Why didn't you like him, Mr. Quinn?" asked Roy. "Because he wasn't a good worker?"

"That would have been reason enough, on that job. But he was a drinker, a real heavy drinker, late near every morning with the drink. There was nothing much I could do about it, for I'd had my orders. But one day, I remember, I found a bottle he'd tucked away under a joist; and I threw it into the river, and told him that, orders or no, if ever I found him taking another drink on the job, where every man's life was another's, either he'd go or I would. And, at any rate, he never did *that* again."

"What *did* he do?" Roy took his cue from Quinn's emphasis.

"Drank on his own time. And brawled. He got into fights once or twice every week at the cantina. Not that I cared if he had his own head broken but he stirred up trouble with the men. Always looking for quarrels, as if his fists were the only way he could let loose the meanness inside him. Once, I remember, when some of the men were playing poker in the cantina and West tried to take a hand, one of them—Rubio Sanchez, a quiet enough man who worked a cement mixer—Sanchez said they had enough players and they wanted a peaceable game. West waited for him on his way home and then beat him within an inch of his life.

"So," said Quinn, "between the fights and the drink and the way people felt about him, I thought I wouldn't be long troubled with West. And I wouldn't have much cared, to speak the truth, if he'd slipped over the falls or been pushed in."

Eleanor had taken just enough dinner to avoid drawing attention to herself. She thought, as she listened, that her perspective now was exactly the reverse of what it had been at Patzcuaro. She had gone there to see a hero and had heard about a drunken wretch. She had come here expecting to hear more about his drunken wretchedness but she knew

now that the story must end differently. Quinn had already told them that West had eventually become his friend; so she heard all this against a background of the knowledge that West must have changed.

Still, over it all hung the idea of the Hero of the World hiding out in this Mexican byway under a false name, in a digger's job, drinking and brawling. The man whom governments had honored, whom millions had fought to glimpse, a derelict drunk in a Mexican jungle. What had disarmed him? What was the flaw in him that time had breached and exploited with the sickening pounding of day after day after day? . . . like a boxer who pounds an opponent's weak eye knowing there isn't time for the eye to heal, that all the man can do is suffer the pounding and hate the dragging-out of every helpless minute until the fight is over.

Quinn happened to glance at her and his eyes lingered a second. He spoke again with his eyes still on her face.

"There are all kinds of mean men, I suppose. Some mean from childhood, some even that are born mean. But there's a kind that's driven to meanness, driven out of their heads by things that have happened to them, and they drink and they hell and they do God knows what because they can't stand the sight nor the thought of themselves. There's men that—" He really broke off the sentence abstractedly, but the maid came in a moment later with coffee and he pretended it was because of her that he had stopped. She served the usual strong Mexican coffee in an earthenware pot, with hot milk added to taste. When she had gone, Quinn continued:

"The only thing that made me able to bear the man at all was a bit of curiosity. I wondered who he was and where he had come from that the bosses had ordered me to take him on. But as I say, I never learned who'd ordered it. So I resigned myself to nine parts disgust and one part

curiosity about him, for I knew there was nothing I could do to get rid of him. And a lucky thing for me, it soon turned out.

"One day," said Quinn, "about two months after West came to work here, he and I were out on a scaffolding over the upper river. And a poor job of work that scaffold was, too, for it gave way under us and down we went. The next thing I knew, I was in the water and out of breath, and the *next* thing, a beam of the scaffold came down on my head and—lights out." He blew out the match he'd used for his pipe. Roy smiled secretly at this touch; even the grudging Quinn couldn't resist enjoying his story just a bit. "I'd have been drowned sure if it hadn't been for West. It happened above the falls and no one at all saw it until I was out in the middle of the stream, in the strength of the current. They told me later that West hadn't been hit by the beam and although he could have got ashore, he swam after me out into the current, and pulled me to a rock there in mid-stream—me all the time unconscious from the clout on the head—and he held me and himself there with the stream tearing at the two of us till they got a boat and a line and took us off. Oh, I was fit as an ox in a couple of days, but West—what with all the drinking he'd done and the fact that he was all sweated up before he fell in—he caught pneumonia. Terribly sick, the man was. We've a bit of a hospital here in the village, to tend to the workmen and their families. Well, he lay there for three weeks and just barely pulled through. Then they needed his bed, so I took him in here in my house and we nursed him, the maid and myself—I was not married then—we nursed him until he'd his strength back. And by that time, he and I . . . well, I invited him to stay on."

He had actually been in this house, thought Eleanor, in this room. Thinking so much of the man in the past few days, these trips in search of him, had given him an apocry-

phal aura. It was a common enough phenomenon when thought and talk were concentrated on a person who wasn't present, only now it was quadrupled because of the identity and fortunes of this man.

Quinn rose. "Let's go outside," he said, "so they can clear away." They went out to a roofed arcade at one side of the patio, and sat there and smoked. A gentle rain was falling on the banana palm and the plants.

"You were grateful to him?" suggested Roy to start the story rolling again.

"There was that," replied Quinn, now in the evening gloom only faintly visible in his high-backed armchair. "There was something else too." He said this next almost doggedly as if in spite of anticipated disbelief. "He seemed to be grateful to me.

"Not for what you might think. Not because I'd taken him in and nursed him. He accepted all that in a queer, matter-of-course way that amused me. It was that he'd saved my life. He seemed grateful that I'd fallen in the river with him and given him a chance to save my life. It was as simple as that. Or as complicated."

. . . Yes, she thought, not in the least surprised, that's precisely what would have happened. I don't know why I think so, I haven't the least idea why I'm not surprised. I only know that the fact that he was grateful—and why he was grateful—seems entirely right and fitting. As if it were exactly what I expected. . . .

"It puzzled me," said Quinn, "that he should make so much of hauling me out of the water; for, although I was thankful surely, it seemed to me that any man would have done as much as he, if he could have. And any man that had done it wouldn't have thought much about it. But I remember him—sitting right here where we are now, wrapped in a robe and a blanket and his cheeks hollow and pale—I remember him smiling and saying, 'What do you

think, Quinn? I saved a man's life. What the hell do you think?' "

. . . It'll only be a moment now, she thought. I'm going to learn why this story took hold of me from the start. Quinn won't fail me, he's going to tell me now, he can't help it, he can't leave out the heart of the matter. . . .

"And yet I didn't mind his talking about it," said Quinn, "because it wasn't really bragging at all. It was more as if he'd found out something about himself. For all the world he was like a man who'd been falling and had stopped, a man who'd suddenly quit running from something he'd been afraid of for a long time."

. . . Light. That was it. Crystal clear. The hero had been afraid. . . .

Roy turned to her. "Something wrong?"

She settled back in her chair. "What? No. No. Sorry."

. . . Something had made the hero a coward . . . like herself.

Like herself. . . .

"Well," Quinn gave them a word to hang to while he relighted his pipe, his long concave face leaping in and out of darkness, "while he was mending, he said the same thing again different ways, but never explained it, and I got the same feeling from it. And without ever doing any one particular thing—I couldn't tell you why to this day—he made me feel different toward him, he made me respect him. And then when he was able to walk again and go out, the first thing he did was to visit that man Sanchez whom he'd beat up and apologize to him; and he gave the man back what the hospital had cost him." Puff. "So—I had this big house—I invited him to stay on with me.

"And a queer thing, too—from the day he got sick till the day that he left, I never saw him drunk again."

Roy said, "You mean because he found he was man

enough to pull you out of the river, that gave him the strength to cut out heavy drinking?"

"Perhaps," replied Quinn. "Or perhaps finding that he'd a scrap of manhood left in him eased the thing that had made him drink in the first place. Perhaps that."

"Well, did you ever find out what it was? The thing that had made him start drinking and rampaging?"

Seemingly Quinn didn't hear the question. "As time went along, we grew to be good friends. And I was amazed that the man I'd thought only a drunken tramp had all these strange feelings in him, all these curious things to say. A man of some mind. Not just education, which is not the same thing, but a sensible, clear view of this hellhole of a world. A man with a quiet, joking kind of—quality to him.

"And all the time he lived here, he looked the way I'd felt when I woke up on the bank of the river. With one difference. He seemed not quite sure that he wouldn't fall back in again. . . . At any rate, we were friends, as good a friend as I've had in my life. And I may say, by the way and without brag, it's a life that's led me here and there."

. . . Yes, but what happened then? What did he do when he'd stopped falling? Did he simply hang in mid-air? Or did he try to climb back? Did he slip, did he fall further? . . .

"Then about a week after he was fit again, when he was just about ready to go back to work, he surprised me once more. He came down to breakfast one morning, and he looked so trembling and shiny, I was afraid the sickness was on him again. But he just grinned and said, 'I've got the damndest idea, Justin. I'm leaving your crew. I'm going to work in the hospital here.' I asked him why and he said only that he thought he'd like to. Queer as the things were I'd come to expect of him, I thought this was the queerest, so I pressed him about it; and he said, 'I've got to, that's all.'

I left it at that. It was his business, after all; and a man wouldn't do a thing like that without reason.

"It was more than mere words, though, for that very day he applied for a transfer and it was granted. In all our talk, he'd never told me who had first ordered that he be taken on here and I'd never asked him, but it must have been someone who mattered, for his transfer was put through at once. They offered to make a job for him in the hospital office, but he went to work as a plain orderly there. And there he worked six days a week, doing everything, the lowest, the dirtiest work, with not a complaint or a whimper. White men, Indians, old, young, hurt, diseased, he worked for them all and never watched a clock. And never regretted his transfer and, though he took a drink with me once in a while, he never again got drunk. And never bragged of what a thing he was doing.

"At times," said Quinn, "he was almost cheerful."

. . . Why did he do it, the hospital? If I were he, why would I have done that? If I had found out I wasn't all coward, why would I go to work in a hospital? . . .

"But he left before a year was out, didn't he?" asked Roy. His tone had changed; it seemed now to reflect some of the gravity of Quinn's voice. "If he left four years ago, he couldn't have stayed in the hospital more than ten months or so. Why did he go? Did something happen?"

"Something happened, right enough," replied Quinn, "but not to West. Four years ago the new volcano erupted up north and wrecked dozens of villages and towns and hundreds of farms. The Red Cross and the hospitals up there were terribly shorthanded, and they sent out a call for help. When West heard about it, he said he thought he'd move on to the north. And the day he left, when he went to the car station, half the Indians in the village walked along behind him, crying and rubbing their eyes and calling out to him to stay."

He paused, while ostensibly that day foregathered in his mind from the points of his memory's compass. "Well, it was a sight, that was. The big broad-shouldered man—slightly stooped now, to be sure—and his round brown eyes fixed straight ahead of him, serious and a little smiling. With his one battered suitcase and his old stained suit that hung loose on him now, and his face still thin, though it was ten months since his sickness, but better looking than when he came, if you understand me. And that little troop of ragged Indians following after.

"We shook hands good-bye and he got in the car and sat in the middle of the bench stiff and straight. When the car was about a third of the way up, he waved once. And that was the last I ever saw of him.

"I was five years old when I last cried," said Quinn, "and I didn't cry that day. But that was the closest I've come to it. Not sorrowful either, for in a way I was glad he'd gone." He took his pipe from his mouth. "I saw that it was a man who'd turned around and was on his way back."

"Back to what?" exclaimed Eleanor, hearing her voice before she had considered the words. She checked herself; but she couldn't leave her question dangling, had to plummet it to a conclusion. She continued quietly, remembering Alabam: "Was it something about the flight?"

They couldn't see Quinn's face clearly, so they didn't know what he was thinking while he was still. When at last he spoke, his voice was both cautious and sad. "Even if he's dead now, I've no right to answer that."

"Mr. Quinn," said Roy, "you call him West. But you knew he was Earl Seastrom, didn't you?"

Quinn knocked out his pipe on his heel. The sparks showered to the ground, dying as they fell. "I've said all I have to say. All I can say. More, perhaps, than I ought to have said. But it's a long time since I talked of him with

anyone. Things store up." He got to his feet in the dark. "It's late. I must go to bed now. The maid will show you to your rooms whenever you're ready."

They thanked him for his hospitality and for his help, and he replied, "Very well."

"I'm trying to make up my mind," said Quinn, "whether to wish you luck in your search. I can't decide. So I'll have to leave it at that." At the door he said, "I'll be gone very likely before you're any of you up in the morning. I won't see you again. Good-bye."

The rain had stopped. Roy and Eleanor smoked a last cigarette in the patio.

"A box of cigars to the lady in the white blouse," said Roy grimly. "You certainly guessed right about the guy. Just from those few words that Alabam said." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Jesus, I wish I hadn't got mixed up in this thing. Because now, even if the studio calls off everything, I'll still want to go on looking for Seastrom."

She nodded. "I will too."

A frightening, friendly feeling hummed inside her. . . . She had met a sudden mirror and seen a quasi reflection of herself, and having stepped through the glass, she was encased and familiar within the new self but frightened because she didn't know what would follow. She realized now that what had seared her from the first in Alabam's voice, what had been corroborated here tonight, was a sense of identity: an analogy in fear and flight. For some reason, the hero, too, had turned and run.

But here in Huapango he had stopped running; now she wanted to know, she ached to know, what had really happened here. Oh, she knew the overt acts, the rescue, the job in the hospital, but what had they meant to him, how had he exploited them so that, at the very least, he had managed to stop running? Perhaps he had even found the

strength to retrace his steps all the way to the thing he had been escaping. . . . And perhaps, since they were somewhat alike, if she could find him, if she could speak to him, she might. . . .

Fantastic.

. . . But no more fantastic than her present existence. She had nothing now, she was bankrupt of hope or prospect. This was at least a chink in the wall of her poverty. She was aimless and inert; this was at least a spark to galvanize her. She had figuratively and literally nothing better to do. And it would be easy enough; she would simply continue to accompany Roy while he looked for him. . . .

And even if Roy stopped . . .

"I said," Roy was evidently repeating, "I'm glad all this has some meaning for you. As it obviously has. I'm glad you want to keep on with me."

"You'll go to Hidalgia, Roy?"

"Yes. To see what I can see. It's a good deal more than business now. I'm fascinated. You, too, evidently."

. . . "Yes."

He decided to be blunt. "Why, Eleanor?"

"As you say. I'd like to—see what I can see."

In the glow of a light from the house he glimpsed her face. "Well, I wish you wouldn't look so intense about it. You scare me a little." She smiled and took his arm. In a moment he said, more gently, "Well, never mind me. Go ahead and look intense if you want to."

They walked around the patio once, and he said, "You want to know what does scare me?"

"All right."

"I get the feeling that you expected all this about Sea-
strom. Not that you knew any of it, but that none of it sur-
prises you especially. Like—like finding a glove that you
never saw before and you've put it on and it fits as if it had
been made for you."

She finished her cigarette. "Roy . . . someday we'll talk."

"Someday." Not feeling the least bit facetious, he said, "It's a date."

She slept better than she had expected—about four hours. When she opened her eyes, the brightness of the day sounded like a chord.

She looked at her watch. It was only seven o'clock. She could hear the quiet through the house. She got up and dressed quickly.

Downstairs she found the place deserted except for the maid who was sweeping out the hall toward the open front door. By way of greeting the maid grinned and nodded at her as if she had done something which was highly approved. With a few signs Eleanor was able to indicate that she was going for a walk. The maid again nodded stoutly.

Outside she turned right, merely because the street looked prettier that way. She had no real plan for reaching Rubio Sanchez's house.

As she walked, she went over what she had heard last night and more especially what she had felt. She had thought it would perhaps sound different and she would feel different in the surging light of day, like the difference in the color of cloth by lamp and sun. But now, by daylight, it seemed even truer.

When she had waked this morning she had been afraid that last night, out of despair, she had forced herself to imagine a pseudo affinity with a man she had never met, that she had pulled over her head a protective hood of false mystical relations. But now, looking back, she saw that there was nothing mystical or psychic about it; it was simply a matter of parallel experience. They had both been fleeing from something.

But he had been able to stop. His unpremeditated rescue of Quinn had obviously halted his flight; he had sought

out this hospital work presumably in the hope that humility and service might give him a firmer grip on himself; and his postcard had indicated that he was gaining. ("Am on the way, I think.")

If she could only find him. If she could only learn exactly what had happened to him. She knew some of the facts but they were only external symbols of what had happened within him. What did they symbolize? What was the prevailing state on which the catalyst had acted, and why in his case had it been a catalyst? She wanted to find out whether the change had finally been effected, the coward transformed, whether it was ever possible for it to be effected. Memory, hearsay, imagination were of no use to her now; she had to *see* someone who had done it, hear from him precisely how it happened.

For there, constantly, were New Gilead and the specter of Van Nuys, the gross, insulting lie, always ahead of her, wherever she turned. She had no prospect of life unless the way were cleared. Out of her desperate need she had to seek even the most desperate remedy. To another person, hoping for help from this man's example might have seemed tenuous; but another person was not herself; her very grip on sanity and peace was tenuous. Certainly this hope of hers might prove to be a mirage; but lost in the middle of nowhere and everywhere, what choice had she but to take that chance?

If she could profit by his experience . . .

But wasn't that leaning too? Wasn't that dependency? All her life she had carried this cowardice in her, a pit latticed over by the care that others had given her. Now, at the first crisis in which she couldn't ask for help, the thin cover had collapsed and she had plunged into the hollow that had always been, unrealized, within her. Wouldn't this new help be only another kind of dependency?

No, because if she found him, she herself would have

to put to use whatever she learned from him. If she could face it even then.

A string of ifs. Still, better than nothing at all. It was better to be a coward with a hope, even if the hope was part delusion. It was better to project ahead a year, even ten, twenty years, than to know that today was endless. In that way, home, New Gilead, her house, could remain real at least in memory; and she had to be able to remember them if she was to look forward to them again.

She was walking up a pleasant cobbled street. A boy with the sun behind him was driving a small herd of goats toward her. As they passed, he gave her a cautious sidewise glance from under dark brows. She said "Buenos días," and he flushed beneath his tan and switched the goats.

There was a bench against a wall at the end of the street. She sat on it and found herself studying the house opposite. It was small with a red-tile roof; the door frame had gone slightly crazy in the manner of old houses. The front step was hollowed in the middle and there was a fence of tall thin cactus enclosing the garden. It was obviously one of the older houses of the town.

. . . Suppose it were Sanchez's house. Suppose this was the place Sanchez had been heading toward from the cantina the night that the drunken West had set upon him and, seething with pent-up poison, had pummeled him unconscious. Suppose this was the house that West himself had come to—on that first day he'd been able to walk after his illness; up this same street, perhaps, past that same boy with the goats, then stopped at that door and knocked and crossed that step. What had been in his mind, what had he been feeling? What had purged the poison? What had enabled him that day to come up this cobbled street, pale and thin ("round brown eyes," Quinn had said) and knock on that door? . . .

A man was striding up the street. It was Teodoro, grin-

ning and walking more slowly now that he'd caught sight of her.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Teodoro."

"The maid tol' me which way you went and they sent me to say breakfast is ready. Señor Roy says we gotta get started."

"Yes. Thanks, Teodoro." She got up.

"You was sitting here thinking, ha?"

"Well . . ." She wanted to give him an answer. He was very nice and he deserved an answer. "I was wondering who lived in that house."

He hesitated as they started back. "Some reason you want me to go find out?"

The last thing in the world. "Oh, no. Thanks. It doesn't matter."

Roy was waiting for them in the patio. "Hi," he smiled, "have a nice walk?"

"Yes. Good morning, Roy."

"Did you find Rubio Sanchez?" She glanced at him quickly. He shrugged and said, "It's just the old story of the village idiot who found the runaway donkey. 'I thought where I'd go if I were a donkey and there he was.' " He took her arm. "Breakfast is waiting."

Deftly and blushingly Señora Quinn served them with the help of the maid while her little boy stared wide-eyed from the doorway at the visitors. She had made pancakes and bacon, and although she couldn't understand their comments, she drew pride and more blushes from their obvious admiration of her mastery of this foreign dish. When they had finished, Roy tipped the maid and asked Teodoro to convey their vast gratitude to the pregnant señora, who bowed and showed them to the door and, with her boy peering past her knees, waved good-bye.

Teodoro had learned that the cable car's first arrival was at about nine-thirty. They had plenty of time. They strolled through the village in the clear morning air, clearer still for the rain of the night before. The green hills that towered above them seemed to send great silent shouts back and forth; the air was vaped pearl, spiced with secret scents. "What a country," said Roy. "Makes you wish the word 'beautiful' was new."

"Roy," she said, looking around, "you don't mean to say all those hills were there yesterday?"

As they walked, Teodoro said, "Señor, I don't wanna butt in, it's none of my business. But I been with you now a few times and I heard all about this here Señor Seastrom. He's some feller, ha, señor?"

"Yep," said Roy, grinning.

"Well, I figured at the start, a man that he's been famous and like that, we find him quick. Then I think if he's acting bad and like that, the way we hear up north, he's gone loco or something. But now I figure, after what we hear from Señor Quinn, here's a man he's got plenty of troubles. Only you don't know what kind of troubles."

"Well, we sort of know the *kind*. Only not the exact, specific trouble. I want to find him more than ever now, Teodoro."

"Well, señor, that's what I mean. If you go to Hidalgo, I like to take you. I got a party I'm supposed to take to Taxco tomorrow. That's very pretty, Taxco; but I rather take you to Hidalgo to find Señor Seastrom. O.K.?"

Roy clapped Teodoro on the shoulder and laughed. "O.K. I'm going to Hidalgo, all right. And if you can arrange it, you can drive me." He looked at Eleanor. "I suppose you can drive both of us."

"If you don't mind, Roy," said Eleanor.

He grunted. "I don't mind."

Teodoro nodded happily. "That's very fine." Then he

said, "Hey, señorita, I hope there ain't too many clouds around Mount Orizaba when we get to the top. I like you to see the snow on the point."

When they reached the depot they could see the car coming down. It descended with slow inevitability, like an unhurrying Fate. At last they could make out the people within. On the front seat, with his arms spread wide and a cigar in the corner of his smile, sat Tod Lucas.

CHAPTER NINE

Roy turned quickly to Eleanor. "Yes," she said, her eyes on the descending car, "I see him."

Lucas rode down the hill at them. "Hardly a coincidence, this," said Roy. "I wonder who told him we were here. Reyes, do you think?"

"Probably. Look, he's waving."

Lucas *was* waving, with calm cheerfulness. Roy and Eleanor nodded acknowledgment.

"He certainly got here in a hurry," muttered Roy. "There's more on that lad's mind than that assault in Patzcuaro."

The car crawled in next to its platform and Lucas got out. He came toward them with his lumping walk, shifting his weight forward completely and heavily with each step. "Well, right here to meet me," he smiled. "Reception committee."

"Welcome to our city," said Roy.

"Thanks, doctor. Hello, kid." This to Eleanor, and to Teodoro, "Hi."

"You're a long way from home, aren't you, Lucas?" asked Roy.

"Well, doctor," he replied blandly as he took the cigar from his mouth, "who is not?"

"You won't be surprised to hear that we're surprised to see you."

"I figured that. I just hoped I could get here before you left. I did not want to miss you."

"Why not? But before that," Roy interrupted himself, "who told you, we were here? Mr. Reyes?"

Lucas squinted across the sunlit street. "Over there is a small sidewalk-type café. Why do we not sit down in the shade and drink something liquid and say comical things to each other?" Roy glanced back at the cable car. "Do not fret, Mulligan. The car does not go up for half an hour. By then we can exchange many bon mots and witty remarks. What say?"

He seemed to be telling the truth about the car. It was being emptied of freight and wouldn't be ready to leave for some time. In any event they would be right across the street and couldn't miss it. Besides, Tod had come five hundred miles in a hurry to say something; Roy was curious to know what it was.

"Well, we've only just finished breakfast," he said, "but we'll go over and have a cup of coffee with you. All right, Eleanor?" Looking at her, he wondered what was going on behind the smooth white brow as a result of Tod's unexpected appearance, what confirmations, what revisions.

She said all right, and they started across the street. "Hey, señor," said Teodoro, "if it's O.K. As long as we stay here awhile, I like to go see an old friend of mine for a few minutes. Lives not far away. I'll be back in plenty of time. O.K.?"

"Sure," agreed Roy, mildly astonished that Teodoro was so incurious about Tod. The guide strolled off with

that obstinate gait with which he seemed more intent on relentlessly annihilating distance than quickly overcoming it.

They found a small table under an awning, and Tod ordered two coffees and a beer. "Yes," he nodded as the proprietor scurried inside, "I guessed you would be surprised to see me. But if you remember, ol' Uncle Tod warned you that you did not know what you were getting into."

"We remember," said Roy. "You certainly didn't come all this distance just to repeat yourself."

Tod chuckled. "You are a droll fellow, doctor. You are wasted in your job. You ought to be an end man with a minstrel show."

"Let's get to the point, Lucas," said Roy cordially. "You've hurried down here to threaten us. Or, at any rate, to threaten me and Peerless. Well?"

Tod continued to grin, not quite so genuinely. The proprietor came back with their order, and Tod paid. "It's on me," he said, and swigged his beer. "Right, junior. I am getting to it. I just want to make one thing clear first. I am not here to play the heavy. I am here to give you advice, for your own good—believe it or not. I want to set you straight about a thing or three. And I hope you are going to be a smart apple and listen."

"Now, Tod," replied Roy, "you're not going to tell me that I don't stand a chance of finding Seastrom. You wouldn't be here if that were true. Come to think of it, I'm glad to see you. It's an encouraging sign."

"You are easily encouraged, chum," said Lucas.

"That's the story of my life," sighed Roy sadly. "But I'm interrupting. You were going to give me some advice."

Tod took another pull at his glass, then set it down with unwonted care. "Well, scratch 'advice.' Say 'story' instead. And I might as well get right to it. Ol' Uncle Tod is going to

tell you a story." He leaned back and beamed at them. "Brief but pithy. About a guy whom we will call Guy. He, you will not be surprised to hear, works for a movie-pitcher company named Beerless; and he comes down to Mexico for his boss, sticking in his proboscis where he is politely asked not to. Result? The proboscis gets skinned. But Guy is an Eagle Scout; this does not daunt him. So—Step Number Two—he gets hurt. Now this has one of two effects on our hero. One, he is a Very Brave Eagle Scout and he stays in Mexico; in which case he gets hurt very bad. Two, he uses his head and goes home. In which case he dies of old age."

Roy's eyes widened in approval and he tapped Tod's arm with his forefinger. "That's a very interesting story. Only it's not airtight. Suppose this guy Guy went home and *then* told what he knew, and then his company sent someone else. Several ones else."

"You're right," said Tod, "I did leave that open; I will now plug it. So he goes home, but he is still not scared enough to report that what he came looking for is not there any more. So instead he blabs. So very soon he finds out that some big people in his company have been talked to and, what do you know, he is no longer employed. He is out on his—pardon me, kid—can. What is more, he can no longer get a job anywhere in Hollywood. All of a sudden he is on the stink list. And what is the score then? He has, one, been banged around. He has, two, been ditched by the outfit he got banged for. He has, three, got the Indian sign hung on him. He could not win any way he played it. He is a Very Silly Boy." He clucked. "Poor Guy."

"And you," smiled Roy, "didn't come here to play the heavy."

Tod grinned and put his hand on his heart. "Believe me, doctor, I do not enjoy this. I am, to coin a phrase, doing it for your own good. You cannot win."

Roy thought: This story is all the corroboration I needed. The speed with which they got Seastrom his job here, Reyes's panic, the hurry in which they notified Tod and with which he responded, and now these threats of far-reaching influence (probably not much exaggerated to judge by what's gone before), they all prove that we've stumbled on something more than a passé public hero's escapades. But I wonder what.

And because he wondered, he knew that he wasn't going to let Tod put him off. Anyway he couldn't very well back down from a head-on threat like this. Stubbornness, if not courage, prevented it; even if he weren't goaded by considerable curiosity.

Not that he took up the challenge with all flags flying. He felt a twinge of an old fear (he'd felt it last night when his interest in Seastrom was sealed) which recurred whenever he considered involving himself in a new obligation; a feverish mental scurrying for a way to pretend that he hadn't seen the obligation and therefore wasn't obliged. It was so much easier to stay in the shell than to stick out your neck. It would have been much more comfortable now not to have been hooked by an interest in Seastrom, not to have to rise to this challenge of Tod's.

But he was able to withstand the assault of his old fear. Part of this was due to the quality of his curiosity about Seastrom; part to the fact that he was already solidly confronted with the obligation and couldn't possibly pretend ignorance of it; part that the encounter was taking place in front of a witness and that the witness was Eleanor. And part, too, that he was no more irresolute really than most clever young men so lapped in an air-conditioned, cocktail-lounge, quipping life that, far from ever needing resolution, they rarely needed more than the faculty to make will and resolution seem old-fashioned and ridiculous, in a class with mustache cups and patriotism.

These things were not only true about him, he actually thought all of them (in outline if not in detail) in the moment before he replied. And therefore, when he replied, he was able to maintain the two-fisted, easy, competent character he had somehow assigned himself in his relations with Lucas.

"Well, it was an impressive story, Tod. And for all I know, perfectly possible. Sometime you ought to tell it to a fellow who scares easily. It would work." He decided to play it a little dumb and see what happened. "Although, for the life of me, I don't see why you're so upset about keeping that old assault and battery story quiet. Peerless wouldn't advertise it, not if they wanted to use Seastrom in a picture."

Lucas puffed his cigar, studied Roy's face, and made his first mistake. He decided that Roy was honestly puzzled. "As I figured, doctor. You are barking up the wrong lamp-post. Like I told you, like it seems I have to keep telling you, you do not know what you are getting into."

"Well, enlighten me," Roy answered amiably.

Lucas swirled the last of the beer in his glass, watched the tiny waves ripple and lie still. "O.K. I think maybe I had better. Because up to now all this Stanley and Livingstone business could be just an honest mistake with you, doctor. Maybe you think it is just me you are horsing around with and maybe that does not scare you much. To you maybe I am just a fat guy who is not very bright, and why should you and great big Peerless Pictures worry." Away went the cigar butt. "Doctor, I am not just talking for myself."

And indeed as he said that he seemed almost to become someone else. His face seemed to grow remote, metallic. Roy sensed that, although Tod meant what he was about to say, it was something of a burden to him, that he was as much a servant as a master.

"There are people," said Lucas quietly. "Important

people. And there are reasons. The thing with the Indian is peanuts; it does not figure. But these important people, they do not want that ol' Earl—wherever he is—should be disturbed. They will do a lot to keep you from disturbing him. They could easy louse you up on the Coast, the way I said. I will not make like the movies and say that they will stop at nothing, but they have got a lot at stake."

The plane, Alabam had said. Besides, nothing Seastrom had done since the flight was likely to have involved people as influential as the ones at whom Tod was hinting. It was the flight, then.

Roy stabbed. "Do you mean they're still upset about something that happened fifteen years ago?"

Tod's face was frozen. "I didn't say when it happened."

Roy smiled. "No, you didn't." Then he really smiled broadly. "Matter of fact, you haven't said much of anything, Tod. Shucks, I thought you were going to enlighten me." He kept his voice calm, but he felt pleasantly excited. Dangerous or not, this thing he had committed himself to explore was ramified and intriguing. Who were "they"? Who could be hurt by anything that Seastrom had done? "All you did was beat around the mulberry bush."

"I am just indicating size, chum, not naming names. They are big. You are not. You will get burned. Be smart. Be nice. Fade away."

Roy laughed. "You're not much of a psychologist, Tod. Everything you say just makes me more interested. There must be some pretty fancy business at the bottom of all this."

"It is bigger than business," said Tod, and shut up.

Roy reflected a moment, trying to find a fingerhold to pry the door further open. He couldn't find one quickly enough, so he fell back on frankness. He would lay a card on the table just to establish that he hadn't been intimidated. "You know that we know about Victor West."

"I know what I know about what you know. Mulligan,"

said Tod, "the reason I have chased all the way down here is so you would not think it is just my personal objection you are up against, so you would get an idea of how high is up." He leaned forward on his big folded arms like an interested older brother. "Now who do you think is stronger—you or us?"

"You. Who do you think is more curious?"

Tod drew back his head, as one might when a favorite child misbehaves mildly.

"And," said Roy, "even suppose that you and They Who Shall Be Nameless managed to stop me. That wouldn't finish it, you know. Even if I said there was nothing doing in Mexico, the studio would only look somewhere else. They have to find him."

"One thing at a time," shrugged Tod, "is my policy. First things first. And a bird in the hand. Meanwhile, I would make a guess that steps will be taken at other ends."

"To do what?"

"That, chum, you will never have to find out, if you just go home and tell your studio that there is no dice. Not a single die."

"What!" said Roy wide-eyed. "You are asking an Eagle Scout to lie?"

Tod fastened on him the half-hidden eyes that were sunk in his large, square, red face; one side of his mouth worked away in a grin. "O.K., doctor." He got up slowly. "I will not bother you again. From now on, you take my advice or you don't. But if you don't, you have a glimmer of what you're up against. From where I sit, you have the short end of the bet with this Northwest Mounted act. You do not have to get your man. You do not have to get yourself sluggish or fired, or both. What is so Christ Almighty unbreakable about your boss's orders?"

It was odd and also funny, thought Roy, how little his insistence had to do with Peerless and the picture, how

intensely personal this affair had become, as if Peerless no longer existed. This was his and, he hoped, Eleanor's. "Oh, it's not so much the boss," he said thoughtfully. "It's the pixie in me."

Tod shook his head. "Son, you ought to trade in that pixie for one with more brains. He is doing you no good." He waved at them. "Well, see you two at the Junior League Ball."

He walked as far as the corner. He stopped, hesitated, and came back.

He stood before them, frowning a little, his hat on the back of his head, his hands in his pockets. He might have posed for a mural of a modern village blacksmith in his Sunday best, brawny and honest and true. "I would just like to add one thing more," he said. "On my own." For some reason he said this to Eleanor. "I just would like to keep the record straight on my own personal feelings. Even when ol' Earl was being stubborn and lushing around and cutting up, I always liked him. I could not help it. I still do like him. But," his glance shifted to Roy, "all that is by the way."

Then he turned and lumbered off.

The bell rang across the street, signaling that the car was about to ascend; Teodoro sauntered along just in time to climb aboard with them. The car slid up the mountain-side again, again seemingly magically.

"You have a good talk with Señor Lucas?" Teodoro asked Roy.

"Not good, Teodoro, interesting. He told us a few things that helped to fill in the picture. But the only reason he told them was to scare us off. And now," said Roy, peering down at the receding village as if in search of Lucas's hulking figure, "I suppose he's gone to find out who talked to us, so he can tell Reyes to fire him."

"Well, señor," Teodoro said gravely, "you don't got

to worry. While you was busy, I went back to see Señora Quinn. She's Reyes's sister, in case you don't know that. Well, I tell her what's gonna happen, I scare her good, and she went right away to Reyes. She's gonna make him think up some fake name of a feller that talked to us, and then when Señor Lucas comes, Reyes he writes out a discharge slip for this make-believe feller. She says Reyes does what she says or she's gonna pray for their dead mother to curse him." He grinned his enforced gravity away. "Pretty good, ha?"

Roy put his hand on the guide's arm and nodded. "Pretty good, Teodoro." He found himself still nodding a few moments later.

"Look, Teodoro," said Eleanor as the car climbed, "there's Mount Orizaba. And there's the snow." She, too, touched his arm.

"Tennant!" exclaimed Roy, and snapped his fingers. They had threaded their way through the city of Puebla and past the churches of Cholula; now they were assaulting the last range of mountains that lay between them and Mexico City. "I've been figuring and figuring. It all adds up to Tennant."

"You think he's the 'big people' Lucas was talking about?" Eleanor asked.

"Look, Eleanor, who could possibly be hurt by anything Seastrom has done? The aeronautical companies he's worked for? He didn't start working for them until sometime after the flight, and Lucas let it slip that the trouble occurred fifteen years ago. It's tied up with the flight somehow, with the thing that made him a hero. And these companies weren't part of that; they came into the picture after it was an established fact. So they don't stand to lose much if something fishy about the flight comes out. No, there

was only one business directly connected with making Seastrom a hero: the Tennant newspaper chain."

"But Lucas said there was more than business involved."

"Precisely. That's the clincher. Since the flight, Tennant's gone into politics. The Senate now; and it's common knowledge that he's got his eyes on the White House. If anything came out that he'd been mixed up in—anything that made him look bad—it'd move the White House just that much further away."

"Do you think the flight would matter? Something that happened so long ago?"

"Lucas seems to think so. And don't forget," Roy laughed, "Peerless agrees with him. They're hoping that people remember Earl Seastrom."

"Roy, what do you suppose it is about the flight that they're all afraid of?"

He shrugged. "Haven't the faintest. According to Alabam, it's something to do with the plane itself. The first thing that occurred to my lurid Hollywood mind was murder. But it doesn't make sense that Seastrom should have killed Connell. According to Tod's book, Connell was the only one of the two who knew navigation. But whatever it is, they sure want to keep it buried."

"Whatever it is," she said, "it's been buried in Seastrom."

"Well, it's been with Tennant ever since, too," said Roy. "At any rate I'm pretty sure we know now who got Seastrom his job in Huapango."

"Has Tennant that much influence?"

"Oh," Roy threw up his hand with a little gesture of awe, "he owns things all over the world. Incredibly rich. Holdings in all kinds of ventures. Maybe he made a personal loan to the Mexican government. Maybe he controlled the companies that were supplying materials for the dam."

Any one of a dozen tie-ins. Octopus tentacles. Anyway, he had the string and he yanked it quickly."

"Camino Sinuoso," said the highway sign. Sinuous Road.

"And Lucas wasn't exaggerating," said Roy. "Tennant is very well able to throw the book at me, to make things damned difficult. But I couldn't let Tod frighten me off. I—well," he grinned, "maybe I got carried away by my own debonair, steely-eyed manner. But, as Tod guessed, it's now more than a matter of my boss's orders."

Eleanor nodded absently. The Tennant aspect of the search didn't really interest her much. It was part of the elaborate, underground, intricate world of powerful people moving chessmen to protect their power. It had nothing to do with the core, the immediate stinging barb in this matter that had held her fast: the man who had once again subscribed himself a member of the pact (true or not) that life is worth living, defeats worth retrieving.

The car rolled over the Rio Frio bridge.

"You know," said Roy, "if I thought that pulling a man out of the water would do anything basic for my nerve, I'd push Teodoro right in that river, then jump in and pull him out. So help me, I would." Teodoro chuckled.

"Well, after you have your nerve," said Eleanor, "you have to have the nerve to use it."

"Oh, God," moaned Roy, "it's so much easier to be a slave."

At the Hotel Londres, a telegram from the studio was waiting for Roy, congratulating him on the progress he'd made in his search and urging him to spare neither expense nor time in proceeding. He thereupon asked Teodoro to make arrangements to drive him up to Hialgia the next day. He told Eleanor they'd be leaving about ten; and she said she'd be ready.

That night she borrowed Lucas's book about Seastrom from Roy and read it in bed. There was a frontispiece—a photograph of the two pilots taken the day before the flight. Connell was shorter, older, quite plain-looking; a face one could almost call ugly if it were not for a humorous, tolerant quality that lay in the mouth and eyes.

Then Earl. The brown hair that was parted down the center and yet managed to look right, not ridiculous; the eyes that were round and liquid and set deep; the cleanly molded young face that wore a not quite wide, shy smile. He was standing with his hands on his hips and his checked cap on the back of his head, next to his partner in front of their plane, smiling out and up at the world. He was saying: "This is us, the adventurers. We stand here for the daring, the surge, the irrepressible that refuses to be channeled and orderly. Remember, you and you, do you remember the recklessness and high spirit that were once upon you, that did not care so much for life as for living? That one spark, that last spark you felt ten, eighteen, thirty years ago? We stand here for that faint spark in all of you—fused and arched in one great soaring leap across danger from earth to earth again. . . ."

She read the story of Seastrom's childhood. He had grown up in a small Ohio town in which his father had owned the first garage. He had been an only child, and his mother had died when he was an infant. When he was seven years old he had only barely been saved from drowning and had been ill for some months after. (The man who had saved Quinn from drowning, thought Eleanor. The queer things that line up, looking backward in a life.) As a boy, he had spent most of his time around his father's shop poking into motors and machinery, like a lot of American boys growing up in the first days of the Motor Age. When he was fifteen his father had been killed in an explosion in the garage. Earl had gone to live with an older cousin who had sent

him to a vocational school and then to one of the first colleges that gave courses in aeronautical engineering. He had progressed brilliantly and swiftly there and after graduation had returned home for the summer. Connell, an ex-war ace, had come barnstorming through Seastrom's town and the young engineer had made a repair on his motor which no one else had understood. They had become friends, gone into business together, designed a new plane which won a race. Connell had taught him to fly and Seastrom had got his license. Then they had submitted a design for the Tennant Trophy. . . .

There was a section of photographs: the plane in flight over San Francisco Bay, the welcome in Auckland, the parade in Honolulu, the landing in San Francisco, the City Hall steps in New York, the White House lawn. There was also a photograph of a gray-haired clergyman standing in front of a small frame house with the sea behind it. The caption read: "Rev. Howard Kemsley Rees, The Rescuer of Earl Seastrom."

Eleanor looked for him in the narrative. Dr. Rees was a retired clergyman who had lived in a house on the sea about fifteen miles outside of Auckland. He had been out fishing in his motor launch early on the morning of the twenty-third and had found Earl Seastrom floating in his life preserver clinging to a fragment of the plane's wing. He had brought the flier ashore, waving meanwhile to the search planes that roared overhead but paid no heed. As soon as they had reached his house, the clergyman had phoned the airport. In twenty minutes Tod Lucas had hurried out and two doctors had come shortly after. But Tod had been closeted with Earl for about forty minutes before the doctors—and the reporters and officials and photographers and police, who had since arrived—were admitted.

When asked about the delay, Lucas had said, "Well, fellows, I'm Mr. Tennant's representative and he was Earl's

backer. I had to get it first and get it exclusive. Go ahead on in now. You'll find old Earl in great shape."

. . . Curious. This was the same Tod who had hurried down to Huapango today—fifteen years later—to warn them off. She had sat opposite him only a few hours ago and looked at his face. If there was any shattering secret about Seastrom, this man knew it. Yet for all his knowing it, he was a man much like any other, he ate and drank and worried, would die. The secret (if there really was one, she forced herself to hedge) was no magic rune, no talisman against the conditions of mortality; Lucas knew it and he wasn't whole. She remembered, when she had first gone to college, how she had fallen headlong in love with one of her professors. Then she'd met his wife and had thought: This woman has what I want so desperately. She's loved by him, is held and kissed and cherished by him. Yet she has a cold in the nose now, just like me. And she talks about her favorite radio programs and recipes. His love can't be the soul-transforming benediction I imagined it; it's left her just another woman. That meeting had done a lot to cure her of her infatuation (and had cleared the way for Jack).

Still, this comparison with Tod and Seastrom didn't hold. The parallel was reasonably exact but it simply didn't deter or dismay her. There were some places where logic didn't apply; and this, out of her great need, was one of them. She remembered a line from Kafka: "Logic is doubtless unshakable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to go on living." Of what use would it be to prove to herself that her one hope for rescue was baseless? She would rather have its comfort, however long or little it lasted.

Besides, Tod may have known the original cause of Seastrom's subsequent behavior but he didn't know its ultimate result. At any rate, he didn't know what she had guessed at: the meaning of that result. Courage, like beauty, sometimes lay in the eye of the beholder.

Those forty minutes, thought Eleanor, those first forty minutes in which Tod had spoken to Seastrom after the flight. What had happened in those forty secret minutes when he had refused to let the others in? Everything that had happened since might have stemmed from that interview. . . .

She went over the borderline into sleep, imagining, imagining.

CHAPTER TEN

Roy was shaving the next morning when Teodoro came up to his room. He was about to make a joke about the driver's earliness but he restrained it when he saw the look on the man's face.

"What's the matter, Teo?" he asked. "You look as if your Buick had died."

"Got bad news, Señor Roy," sighed Teodoro, sinking onto the arm of an easy chair. "I can't take you to Hidalgo today."

"Why not? That Taxco deal?"

"Sí, señor. I spoke to my boss and asked him could he get someone else to take my party to Taxco, and he says it was too late, all his other drivers are busy. I tried last night—everybody I could think of—to find somebody else to take my place, but I don't have no luck. I got to go to Taxco."

"Hell." Roy rubbed his neck. "What do we do now?"

"Well, I get back tomorrow night, but I guess you don't want to wait two days, ha?"

"I couldn't even if I wanted to, Teodoro. Time presses."

The guide nodded. "Yeah, that's how I thought. Well,

you could go to Hidalgia by train." He pulled a timetable from his pocket. "I got this downstairs. There's a train that goes at ten-thirty. Gets there two-thirty."

"I guess we'd better take it, Teodoro." He put his hand on the man's shoulder. "I'm sorry, old fruit."

Teodoro shrugged. "That's all right. You couldn't help it any more than me. Gosh, I almost don't show up to drive those other people and take you anyway. But I get in trouble with my license."

"Driver's license?"

"No, guide's license. All guides and drivers for tourists, they gotta have a government license. Costs a lot of money, a license, and they're very strict with you. I do a thing like this, they gonna call me up on the rug."

"The carpet."

Teodoro snapped his fingers. "The carpet." He got up. "Well, you tell the señorita I'm sorry, ha?"

"Sure. She'll be sorry too."

"And I hope you gonna remember and tell me what you find out there. Maybe you find Señor Seastrom still lives there, ha?"

"Maybe, Teodoro. Anyway, you'll get a full report. I promise."

The driver nodded, looking a little like a downcast, friendly horse.

Roy told Eleanor about it at breakfast in the hotel restaurant. She was disappointed. "It won't be the same," she said. "Riding on a train will seem pallid after driving with Teodoro."

"Yes," agreed Roy, "a train doesn't whistle every time it passes a pretty girl." He laughed at his own joke, which was usual enough for him; but, what startled him because it marked an unexpected change, she laughed too. It wasn't a loud or long laugh, but it was the first time she had ever given any of his jokes more than a mere check-smile of

acknowledgment. After he got used to the idea of her laughing, he rather liked it; and thought he knew why it had happened at last.

He wondered whether, on the train or in Hidalgo, he might bring up the subject of that New York job. The necessity for a decision was beginning to prick his consciousness now. This time he wanted to refer to it not only as a campaign ribbon of worldliness but also for advice; or at least (like most requests for advice) he wanted to ask for advice as an opportunity to talk about the matter and reach his own decision. He wondered whether she would consider the subject an imposition or intrusion. Well, that might perhaps depend on what happened in Hidalgo. She had fastened herself in such a queer, personal way to this Seastrom matter, it evidently had such an immediate pertinence to whatever was on her mind, that his best plan would probably be to wait until they'd nosed around Hidalgo a bit and she'd had a chance to relieve some of her own anxieties.

To be frank with himself, however, he, too, had an itch to find out what had happened to Seastrom, to see whether rigor of the soul (if that's what it had been) really paid off. In anything, that is, deeper than smugness or self-righteousness. . . . Or did he add that last qualification merely in flip self-defense? Could it be that he really *was* looking for a kind of example? A kind of Sample With Directions Enclosed. You Too Can Build Muscles of the Spirit in Thirty Days.

Good grief, thought Roy, she's tied her own personal kite to this Seastrom business, and here I go too. Is this wise, young man? Is this prudent?

But even self-contained cynicism, detonated internally so that none of the fumes and force escaped, couldn't entirely destroy a certain curiosity. And a kind of respect for that curiosity.

When they had almost finished breakfast, Roy saw two

men enter the restaurant and speak to the hostess at the door. The men were noticeable, first, because they were obviously Mexicans—the restaurant was patronized almost exclusively by Americans—and, second, because even at this distance they exuded the aroma of officialdom.

The hostess looked about the room and nodded in Roy's direction. The men thanked her and headed toward their table.

"Company's coming," said Roy, with a slight frown, and Eleanor looked around. "And my X-ray eyes see badges under their coats. I wonder what bodes."

The men came to their table and bowed. The older and stouter said, "Señor Anderson?"

"That's right."

"Pardon the disturbance, señor, but I have been sent to talk with you." He held out his card case; in it was an identification card with "Departamento de Turismo" in large print, some lines in Spanish, and the typewritten name "José Ortiz Lopez." "When you and the señorita have finished your breakfast, could we speak with you, please?"

"Of course," said Roy, mentally thumbing through the possibilities. "We're finished now."

They paid their check and followed the two men out of the restaurant into a quiet corner of the lobby. "Señor, would you be so kind to show me your tourist permit?" said Ortiz Lopez.

"Gladly." Roy took the yellow card from his wallet. Eleanor started to hunt through her bag, but Ortiz Lopez said, "Do not bother, señorita. It is only the señor."

He inspected Roy's card and nodded pleasantly. "Bueno. Señor, you read this card before you signed it?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then you remember it says you come to Mexico only for purpose of recreation—for vacation—and you promise

not to take any employment while here, not to do any job."

"Well, yes. Yes. I remember."

"Señor, I regret to say our department has received a report that you are engaged in work here in Mexico."

"But that's not true," Roy replied, thinking as he spoke that Lucas had wasted no time. "Anyway, it's not strictly true."

Ortiz Lopez inclined to him slightly and politely. "You have not been doing work of any kind? You have been traveling for pleasure only?"

"Well, no, I've also been doing a little job—"

"Ah." Ortiz Lopez leaned back.

"But it's not for a Mexican company. I was just cleaning up a little business for my American employers."

The agent shrugged. "Señor, a report has been received. (I wonder whether you act on them all so quickly, thought Roy.) It says you are engaged in work in violation of your tourist permit. To work, one must secure a regular passport and visa."

"But I can explain this very easily—"

Ortiz Lopez bowed. "I have no doubt, señor. And I must ask you to be so kind to do so. Will three o'clock this afternoon be convenient? Here is the address." He handed a card to Roy.

Roy took it, glanced at it, then looked at Eleanor. There was a little smile of anger and resignation on her face. He didn't know whether he had the same expression on his own face but he felt somewhat as if he had glanced into a mirror.

"Three o'clock, señor," said Roy.

"Bueno." The agent handed back the tourist permit. "Bring this with you, please. Until three o'clock then. Señor. Señorita." Ortiz Lopez and his companion, who had stood by impassively, bowed to each of them and left.

"I suppose," said Roy, "Lucas heard that we'd found out about Hidalgo."

"It's like someone behind you, breathing on your neck." She hesitated a moment. "Roy, what are you going to do now? You'll have to put off your trip till tomorrow."

"At least till tomorrow. Meanwhile the studio's in a hurry and I'm in a hurry. And, if you don't mind my saying so, you're in a hurry. Besides," he scuffed the carpet angrily, "I don't like being stymied. Particularly by Powerful Unseen Forces."

For Eleanor the next move had been settled the moment Ortiz Lopez's purpose was manifest. In some matters there is no need to think out a decision; it is made instantaneously. As a sop to the canons of judiciousness, one goes through the mental etiquette of observing deliberative niceties but the split-second judgment has already been reached. So now, although she weighed a great pro and a few smaller cons, she knew what she was going to say.

"Roy, the Tourist Department doesn't want to speak to *me*." He looked up quickly. "I could go to Hidalgo today and find out what I can. And when you come up tomorrow you'd have saved just that much time."

He smiled gently, feeling brotherly and protective. "You really are anxious to find him, aren't you?"

She continued: "I've listened to you ask questions a couple of times now. I think I could do it."

He recalled that it had been only a few days since he'd had to convince her to come with him to Patzcuaro. Now the persuaded had become the persuader. Of course when they'd started neither of them had known that the matter was chordal, polyphonic; they'd expected a mere single-stranded, routine piece of tracking and meeting and chatting. . . . He felt like a bungling chemist who had taken a flask of opaque liquid and added to it a vial of colorless, seemingly innocuous fluid which proved to be a powerful reagent, rendering the dark liquid alive and seething. He could see the change; what he wasn't sure of and what dis-

turbed him with both fear and hope was whether the change had been necessarily for the better. If it didn't last, the after-effects might be worse than the original state.

"Oh, as far as the mere doing of it is concerned," he said, "I'm sure you could. Matter of fact, practically all the happy hunches so far have come from you. But—well, I don't want to be stupid about this—but there might be an element of danger."

She blinked her eyes slowly, almost solemnly. "I know. And I'm not brave. I don't care. I simply don't care. I want to go, Roy." He sensed an impulse in her to reach out and touch him beseechingly which she checked before her hand moved at all; but he saw it in her mouth and chin. "May I go, Roy?"

"Well," he considered it, "I don't suppose they'd expect you to be going. Or to be going alone. Might take 'em by surprise." He grinned. "Gosh, listen to us. We're getting to talk like people in a spy picture. But I don't think we're being shadowed or anything like that, and you might pick up all that's to be had in Hidalgo before word about you got back to Lucas. Or whoever word gets back to in these things. Yes, if you want to go, I suppose it'll be all right. But it's entirely up to you."

The possibility of her going alone had arisen so quickly that she had to accept equally quickly to mask her qualms. "Then I'll go. How do you think I ought to begin when I get there, Roy?"

"I'd try to get a list of English-speaking staff members at the hospitals in Hidalgo, if I were you. Then I'd go to see them and ask them what they know about Victor West. I think you might get a list like that from the desk clerk or the manager of your hotel. They'd know all the hospitals, and for their guests' sake they'd know which people at each spoke English."

"Yes, that sounds sensible. But—what reason will I give? Oughtn't I to have some reason for asking about him?"

He ran his hand over his close-cropped head. "You can say you're my representative," he decided. "I'll write a few words on one of my cards. But it might be just as well not to flash it unless you absolutely have to."

"Yes. I'll remember." She turned to him. "I'm very grateful, Roy."

"Shucks, you'll be doing me a great favor, scouting out the ground for me before I get there. Save me a lot of running around."

"I hope so. I'd like to do something for you—in return."

What a strange girl she was. Most girls (most people, he edited himself) impressed him as being painted one or two or three predominant hues; but she was like one of those magician's handkerchiefs which can change color continually. With her, the only constant was that most of the colors were somber. He took another look at her now to remind himself how really lovely she was, too, unobtrusively, almost unwillingly.

"We'll have to hurry if you're going to catch the ten-thirty train," he said.

On the way to the station Eleanor remembered the day on which she had first driven a car; the first time she had been entrusted with the vehicle in which she'd ridden many times before while someone else had been managing it. She felt something like that today—embarking alone on a matter in which she had been up to now only a companion. (Curious, she thought, how grave matters so often refer back to trifling ones as antecedents.) For a moment—out of exhilaration and a grateful affection—she felt tempted to tell Roy something of what he obviously wanted to know: what it was that had happened to her to make her so interested in finding Seastrom. But she guarded against the impulse. She knew that these moments of instant, immediate communion don't last; and on a bleak cold Tuesday the confidences of

a friendly Monday not only seem silly but are sometimes shameful and harmful. Besides she couldn't yet imagine herself uttering aloud anything of what was deepest in her; she couldn't imagine putting the words into another person's ear and perhaps (a strangely horrible thought) having to reply to something he said about it.

Next to her in the cab Roy wasn't thinking about her secrets; he was remembering that he had planned, before Ortiz Lopez had derailed the plans, to discuss his own affairs during their trip to Hidalgo. Now he felt he ought to mention something about them in order to nourish whatever thoughts she might have of him while they were apart, so that she wouldn't think of him merely as happy, glib Roy. He wanted to add a little flavor of Pagliacci.

"There's an extra disappointment for me in not being able to go," he said. "I'd planned to talk to you about this New York job I've been offered. I wanted your advice."

"That's flattering, Roy, but I don't know how much use I'd have been to you. My head's not a great deal of use to me these days. I doubt that I could do much for someone else."

"Just the same—if you hadn't minded—I was going to take it up with you. It sometimes helps just to talk things out. Helps you to reach a decision. Well," he sighed, "at least I'll have something to mull over till I see you again."

The taxi scooted à la Mexicana around the corner, past the Arch of the Revolution to the terminal. Roy walked down the platform with her to the "Primera" coach of her train.

"Teodoro says the best hotel in Hidalgo is the Fundador," he said. "If you aren't back by the time the Inquisition releases me, I'll come up there." He put her aboard the train and swung her bag up onto the rack. "Thanks again, Eleanor. And if you should find Seastrom—well, will you let me know too?"

It was the moment in which she liked him the most and the least since she had met him.

He decided to have no nonsense about this next matter and, without hesitation, kissed her good-bye. "Thank you, Roy," she said.

The train was not much different from an American day coach except that the green plush seats were harder. It was crowded but that didn't surprise Eleanor. Mexicans were the greatest travelers she had ever seen. They all seemed to be going somewhere all the time. Driving with Teodoro, she hadn't once noticed an empty bus; most of them had been jammed to capacity and carried men hanging on to the baggage ladder behind. So she was grateful now to find a place even in the first-class coach.

She sat on the aisle side next to a Mexican woman who, after the train started, insisted pantomimically that Eleanor change seats with her and sit by the window. She seemed to recognize that Eleanor was a foreigner and evidently wanted her to have the better seat from which to view the scenery. Like Teodoro, the woman was obviously intensely proud of her country and wanted to show it off; she made occasional comments in Spanish about places they passed, although she realized that Eleanor couldn't understand her. Eleanor smiled and nodded appreciatively and hoped that she was looking in the right direction.

The train curved down out of the mountains into desert country. The green hills gave way to great arid stretches of sandy brown and yellow land stuck with cactus and yucca and stunted palm, with bare rock mountains, purple and silver and gray, on the horizon. They jostled along through a succession of nearly identical villages, each with a few one-story adobe buildings, seemingly as deserted as if swept by a plague except for a few people in the plaza and the peddlers and musicians at the station. Nowhere in

these villages was there any sign of what the people lived on; no farms, no gardens, no factories; at most, two or three stores.

Through long, uninhabited stretches of desert the train chugged away—not a house or a cow or any living thing visible. Then suddenly, standing alone in the middle of the waste, a man would appear, waving at the train. How did he get there? Eleanor wondered. What did he do?

The rock hills on the horizon crowded in closer about the track, and they began to climb again. Now and then she saw a cavelike house built right into the side of a slope, out of which children and pigs poured to see the train. The poverty of the Indians, widespread and overwhelming though it was, didn't shock Eleanor as much as their mute acceptance of it. It had an ancient, long-established feeling, expected and inevitable. Peasants, of generations of peasants. The difference between the wretchedly poor in America and these people, she thought, is the difference between tar-paper shacks and adobe walls ten inches thick.

At last, after more identical villages and more bottles of "Coca-Cola fría" from the train huckster and many more exhibitings of her ticket to the conductor (each time he bowed low and said, "Thank you much"), the train found its way through a narrow cleft in the hills and came down into a lovely valley. As they leaned around a wide curve, Eleanor saw Hidalgia far ahead in the middle of the plain, neat and contained, almost a walled city. It was set in the middle of the valley like a jewel, and the plain stretched away on all sides, uncluttered, to a guardian ring of mountains.

The Hotel Fundador had once been the palace of the Spanish governor of the province, a beautiful building inset with small arched balconies. Eleanor's room had its own roofed terrace furnished with a heavy oaken Spanish table

and chairs; it overlooked the Zócalo below, with the towers of the cathedral visible past the tops of the trees. At one side of the Zócalo was a broad avenue with a line of royal palms down its center and the colored-tile front of the state capitol just beyond. A fiesta was imminent or lately past, for the capitol and the hotel and the cathedral were outlined—a favorite method of decoration—with strings of electric bulbs.

After she had freshened up and had a sandwich, Eleanor set to work. It was only midafternoon; by nightfall she might be able to touch a quick nerve in the body of this matter. With a cool veneer of control and the inner trembling of a bride, she went down to the desk. She told the clerk she was looking for an old friend who, she thought, was employed in a hospital here although she didn't know which one. The clerk made out a list for her of the three local hospitals with their addresses and included the names of English-speaking staff members at each. He then secured a calandria for her with a white-mustachioed driver who looked like a swarthy William Howard Taft.

The carriage clip-clopped down the main street to the outskirts of town. There on a grassy knoll stood the newest hospital, a magnificent, widespread, ultramodern building; and on the lawn a herd of cows was grazing. The Mexican touch, she thought; the eternal contradiction.

She was able to ask "Donde el Señor Guzman?" (the staff member's name which the clerk had given her) and soon found the señor. He informed her that this hospital had been opened before the eruption of the volcano but that they had never had an American orderly or nurse or administrative assistant. There were several American doctors, but no Americans of lower rank. Señor Guzman was regretful, and escorted her to the front door.

She showed the second address to President Taft, who nodded with copious understanding and flicked the reins.

They headed back into town, picked their way through a succession of narrow streets and came to a halt before an old Spanish wall with two huge bolt-studded doors in it. Eleanor looked inquiringly at William Howard; he nodded assuringly and pointed with his whip. She got out and opened a smaller door in one of the huge wooden portals, then stepped in and crossed a cool, tile-floored courtyard. A porter at the inner door asked her (evidently) what she wanted, and she replied "Donde la Señora Sandoval?" a question she had been rehearsing ever since she had left Señor Guzman.

The porter, overwhelmingly convinced that she didn't speak Spanish, forebore to give her directions and led her upstairs through the familiar ether-cum-iodoform hospital smell down a corridor to an office door. She was shown into a waiting room and the porter explained to an attendant what she wanted. The attendant conveyed an invitation to her to sit, then departed.

In a few minutes he returned, lifted one finger, crooked it, and said, "Yes?" Eleanor, with a smile of compassion for his difficulty, rose and followed.

She was led to a door only a short distance from the hall on which was a typewritten card reading: "E. F. Padilla Pérez." She assumed that Señora Sandoval was not in and that this person was to take care of her. She followed her guide through a small waiting room past a secretary into an inner office, in itself a paradox; the walls and ceiling and windows were heavy, old, Spanish, but the furnishings were so chromium-tubed and streamlined that she could almost hear the pieces of the chairs and desk click neatly into place with each other.

A man rose behind the desk. He was of middle height with graying temples and dark angry eyes. He wore tinted rimless spectacles and well-cut conservative clothes. Those eyes and his slender, white, somewhat nervous hands were what Eleanor noticed first.

"Good afternoon," he said, "I understand you wish to see Señora Sandoval." His English was good but not quite effortless, as if he had learned it well but didn't much like it.

"Yes, if I may, please."

"I am Dr. Padilla, Señora Sandoval's brother. My sister has left the staff of the hospital. She has not been here for some time. Is there some way I can help you? Won't you please sit down? Is there something I can do for you?"

He was courteous and soft-spoken and he smiled a little, but he had the hot eyes of a man who quarreled a lot in private. "Thank you," said Eleanor and sat in one of the tubular chairs. "It wasn't really necessary that I see Señora Sandoval. It's just that her name was given to me as someone here who speaks English. If you can spare a moment, perhaps you can help me, doctor."

He jerked his head sharply like a mechanical man. "Certainly. Please tell me what I can do."

"I'm looking for a man who I think worked in a hospital in Hidalgo about four years ago. And may be working here still, I don't know."

"A doctor?"

"No, he isn't. He would have been doing some other work. But perhaps you wouldn't know about the other people on the staff."

Dr. Padilla shrugged. "It is a small staff. I would know. What was his name?"

"Victor West."

The doctor was looking straight at her when she spoke the name but the effect was as if he had been looking elsewhere and now turned to her sharply.

Her next question, she knew, was superfluous, but he hadn't spoken and they were suspended uncomfortably for a second. "Did he ever work here, Dr. Padilla?"

"Yes." The white, nervous fingers tightened on the desk-top. "He is no longer present." His eyes, still looking at

her, seemed again to seek her out. "What is your name, please?"

"Shafer. Eleanor Shafer."

"Miss Shafer, are you perhaps related to him?"

. . . No, of course not. "No."

"Ah. But you are a friend of his?"

There was a wall, cold and confronting. This was different from Lucas and Reyes. This was not reticence, this was personal antipathy. It rankled in his eyes. If she said she was West's friend, it certainly wouldn't help her. She had better make it as impersonal as possible and not associate herself with what was apparently (for what reason?) the enemy.

"No, I'm looking for him—for business reasons. Certain things have come up. In the United States. And it's necessary that he be found." She wondered how much of an impression that made, whether she looked at all convincing as a business representative.

Evidently not. The corner of his mouth told her that while he replied: "For business reasons. I see. I regret, Miss Shafer, I cannot help you. West is not here. He has not been here for, let me see, for three years."

"He left as long ago as that?"

"Yes." He thought it over. "Yes, three years."

"Do you know where he went, doctor?"

The doctor smiled. A most unpleasant, half-toothed smile with the hot eyes above it. "I do not, Miss Shafer. I wish that I did."

"You have no idea at all?" She felt as if she were pounding at the big, studded doors outside with her fists. The doors had been shut instantly at the mention of the name; all this was waste motion. But after the long trip and her pleading with Roy for the opportunity to come, she didn't want to quit the scene without hovering at least briefly over her dying expectation.

"Not the slightest idea."

"Well—" any loophole—"could you possibly tell me why you wish you knew where he was? It might help us. . . ."

He stiffened, if a man whose shoulders and neck are haughty can stiffen further. "I regret. It is a private matter."

"I see. I'm sorry. Well, can you tell me anything at all about him, doctor? What he did while he was here? Where he lived?"

"He worked here as an orderly for about a year. That is all I know." The doctor hadn't risen, but the interview was over. The atmosphere, the walls, the whole room seemed to shriek it. The chair, which had welcomed her, became uncomfortable.

"And—and that's all you can tell me." Roy wasn't going to be satisfied with this; he'd insist on coming up himself.

"That is all. Except this. The business on which you need to see him is, I hope, good?"

"Yes, it's to his advantage."

He nodded, his thin, inimical face supporting the mood of the eyes behind the tinted glasses. "Then I am glad that I do not know where he is. I wish I knew, for my own reasons. But it is some consolation to my ignorance that at least you will not reach him with good news."

Before the curiosity that this provoked in her had time to germinate, the door opened and a woman came in. "Oh, I'm sorry, Paddy," she said. "Didn't know you had company. Miss Martinez wasn't outside."

Dr. Padilla rose, obviously glad of the interruption. "We were just finishing, my dear. This is a compatriot of yours. Miss Shafer, may I present my wife."

Señora Padilla was not only American, she looked as if she had just walked in off Park Avenue. Her skirt and short jacket were expensively casual; her hair had been carefully and attractively dressed. She was in her middle forties

and was not a pretty woman—her nose was long and the base of it broad, her chin pointed and her mouth a trifle wide—but the sum of her features was better than its parts. She had a face of frankness and intelligence and address. The first question in Eleanor's mind was "How did they meet?" Before long, it was "Why did she marry him?"

"Miss Shafer, how do you do," said Señora Padilla, shaking hands firmly. "I *am* pleased to meet you. But I hope you're not ill. I always have to be half regretful about anyone I meet in Paddy's office."

"No, I'm not ill, thank you. I called on a matter of business."

"Oh." The señora was evidently making a mental note to inquire later about the nature of the business. "Are you going to be in Hidalgo long?"

"I think not. My business is finished, I'm afraid."

"What a pity," said Señora Padilla, and it was surprising what a sweet smile that unpretty face could manage. "We see so few Americans. There are thousands passing through—tourists—but unless we're lucky enough to have one fall sick while he's here we never get to know them."

"It is unfortunate, my dear," said the doctor, "but Miss Shafer has business elsewhere."

"Oh, are you driving off immediately?" asked his wife.

"No, I have no car," replied Eleanor. "But I'll be taking the morning train back to Mexico City."

"Then couldn't you have dinner with us tonight? I get all the magazines and papers, but it's just not the same as talking to someone from home."

"Thank you very much," said Eleanor, "but—"

"We mustn't be selfish, my dear," interrupted the doctor. "Miss Shafer would probably like to rest for her journey tomorrow."

"Oh. Yes." The señora glanced at her husband, then

back to Eleanor. "Yes, of course. Well, anyway, it's been nice to meet you, Miss Shafer."

"Thank you. It's been nice to meet you too. And thank you for your invitation." She turned to the doctor, who was staring at her fixedly as if trying to push her out with his look. "Good-bye, doctor."

He walked her to the door. "Good-bye, Miss Shafer. I am glad to have been able to tell you what I did."

President Taft was dozing on his seat in the shade across the street. Eleanor touched his knee; he woke with a start and apologized. They jogged back to the Fundador, and Eleanor, who had found the calandria quite pleasant before, felt now that it was open and slow, that she was being displayed in shame and the city was looking on.

What am I to do now? she thought. Friends of his? Others who knew him? How shall I begin, where shall I go? She felt like a child with his first trust who has lost control and let things smash. She wished she had never had that insane impulse to come up here without Roy, she needn't have had the feeling of failure, it wouldn't have been her fault, she wouldn't have been frightened. . . .

The one thing she had never expected: that someone who could help her wouldn't.

Back at the hotel she undressed and showered, then lay face down on the bed, wishing as she flung herself forward that the bed would split before her and she might fall through it, fall forever through moist and soundless air.

Half an hour later—just as it occurred to her that she had better send Roy a wire—her telephone rang. She answered with a feeling of bewilderment, with no idea who it might be, surmising that it must be a mistake.

"This is Charlotte Padilla," said the easily recognized voice. "I hope you don't mind my calling."

"No, of course not, Mrs.—Señora Padilla."

"Say 'Mrs.' if it's easier for you. Most of my American

friends do. I suppose you're wondering how I found you, Miss Shafer." Eleanor wasn't thinking of that at all; she was hoping that it wasn't merely a repeated invitation to dinner. "But there are only about four hotels in Hidalgo that you'd possibly be staying at, and I got right off the bat."

"I see."

"I'm not far away from the Fundador right now, Miss Shafer, and I was wondering whether we might meet in the bar for a cocktail."

"Well, Mrs. Padilla . . ." It couldn't be simple gregariousness. The woman had looked too sensible to pursue an obviously reluctant guest.

"You're probably curious as to why in the world this indefatigable woman is pursuing you. I ought to tell you that after you left my husband happened to mention what you called about."

"Oh." Cool fingers in her bosom.

Mrs. Padilla paused a moment before continuing. "Will you mind meeting me, Miss Shafer?"

Eleanor wanted to cry out: Do you know anything? Can you help me? But telephone talk was so slender a tie. It was so easy to sever it and lose the other person. She had to proceed carefully. "No. I'd like to meet you. Very much."

"Fine." A cheeriness that had in it a quality of "Why shouldn't we be cheery and human even though the matter under discussion is most grave?" "Is the bar of your hotel all right? In fifteen minutes?"

"Yes. I'll be there."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*M*rs. Padilla was wearing a hat now, and as Eleanor walked toward her she wondered vaguely where it had come from in that short interval. Had the doctor's wife gone home in the intervening hour? Then she remembered seeing it in her hand at the office.

"You *are* nice," said Mrs. Padilla, taking her arm and guiding her to a table in a near-by corner. "I don't think I'd have been nearly so nice if someone had come barging into *my* life on such short notice."

"I'm not being nice, Mrs. Padilla," Eleanor replied as they sat. "I'm being curious."

Mrs. Padilla nodded with her eyes on the table, and that nice smile curved up on either side of her long nose. "Well, that makes two of us," she said and chuckled a little, laughing genuinely but also utilizing her laughter to invite Eleanor to relax.

A waiter came up and bowed low. "Do you love Martinis?" asked Mrs. Padilla.

"I like them."

"That's all the encouragement I need." She chuckled

again and ordered two Martinis. "Now." She turned to Eleanor and gave her an acute glance from her pleasant blue eyes. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get one very improbable point settled first. The thing that intrigued me at once was your first name. Paddy mentioned it after you left and my ears pricked up like Pavlov's dog when the bell rang. I happen to be mad about poetry. Do *you* happen to be Eleanor Shafer the poet?"

Eleanor almost gasped. Then she blushed as it struck her with some surprise that she actually *was* the girl who had published two books of verse. Good Lord, in what life had that been? And now to meet someone . . . down here . . .

"Why—why, yes," she replied, "I am. Have you really read—"

"That's marvelous," said Mrs. Padilla quietly, her blue eyes snapping and her smile lighting up further. "That's what I call simply marvelous."

"Have you really read anything of mine?" It was absurd to feel so pleased.

"I've read both your books. I have a standing order with Brentano's to send me every book of new verse published. And I think a lot of your poems are charming. Look," she said suddenly, "I can prove it. Do you mind being quoted at?"

"I don't know. It's never happened to me."

"Then it's high time it did. Remember this?" Mrs. Padilla reeled off quickly but not entirely mechanically:

"I never sit beside this pool
But something of its quiet takes me,
And Time, shrewd elsewhere, plays the fool,
Sleeping within till sunset wakes me."

Eleanor was about to speak; Mrs. Padilla continued:

"A spirit dwells beneath this stream.
It hides from sight and will not meet me;
But I have seen it in my dream,
Walking across great fields to greet me."

"There," she said, smiling again. "O.K.? Do I pass?"

"I don't know what to say," replied Eleanor. "It—it's like finding your name carved on a tree some place you've never been before."

Mrs. Padilla chuckled and patted her arm. "Well, don't look so horror-struck. It's supposed to be complimentary. Besides, you couldn't possibly be any more surprised right now than I am." The waiter brought the cocktails, and they sipped them. "Look, you're sure you can't have dinner with me?"

"Thank you, I don't think so. For one thing, I don't think your husband would care for it."

"Oh, Paddy won't be there. He's working late tonight. It would be just the two of us. We'll go out to dinner, a nice little place near here. Incidentally," said Mrs. Padilla, and her smile lost its humor and became simply friendly, "since we're talking about Paddy, I hope you won't judge him too harshly. He's really a pretty nice guy when you get to know him. It's just that you happened to speak to him on one of the few subjects on which he's . . . Well, *will* you have dinner with me?"

Eleanor frowned slightly. "Let me tell you later—may I?"

"Of course," the other woman agreed immediately and heartily. "However. You didn't come here to talk about poetry, much as I'd enjoy it. You're curious about something else."

"Yes." The simplest affirmation was the safest; anything more and a flood of impatience might have swept out.

"Miss Shafer, I must tell you at the outset that my point

of view about Victor West differs sharply from my husband's. Now," she raised a hand, "I don't intend to backbite my husband to a stranger, a comparative stranger, but he and I do disagree sharply in this matter. I don't want to bore you with my private affairs, but—well, I had to see you privately, and at once."

"Why, Mrs. Padilla?"

"You said you were leaving tomorrow morning. And Paddy happened to mention that you'd told him this business of yours is to Mr. West's advantage."

Eleanor noted the phrase "Mr. West." "Yes, it is."

"Are you at liberty to tell me what it's about?"

A problem. If Mrs. Padilla didn't know West's real identity, would it be wise—or fair to him—to disclose it now? "Well, I can tell you that there's a large sum of money in it for him. I'm a—a kind of deputy for this company that wants to find him."

"You're empowered to pay him this money?"

"No, but if I find him, a man would soon be along to settle all the details. Mrs. Padilla, do you know where he is?"

She shook her head. "To be quite frank with you, I don't. But—if it's any comfort to you—that's not the end of the matter. There might be ways of finding out. Incidentally, won't you call me Charlotte? It irritates me to be called anything else by someone I like."

"Yes, of course, I'll do whatever you like, only will you please help me?" She stopped short. That hadn't sounded very businesslike.

Charlotte smiled kindly again. "You certainly take your job to heart, don't you? Well, I suppose that's fine. Although frankly it's surprising to find a poet in this kind of work, trailing someone through Mexico. But then I suppose there's no living to be made in poetry."

"When are you going to decide?" said Eleanor after a moment.

"Decide what, dear?"

"Whether or not you're going to help me."

Charlotte twirled her empty glass. "I don't mean to be mean, Eleanor. Or coy. But there are—well, it's a somewhat delicate matter. For instance," she said, looking up as though this had just occurred to her, "I'm a little confused by the fact that an American company sends a representative all this distance just to find a hospital orderly. And wants to pay him money. Is it an inheritance?"

"No."

"Then what could any big company possibly want with him?" The question was put with somewhat less frankness than the others before it; and Eleanor sensed that this woman knew something of the answer; knew, at least, that West wasn't West.

Evidently if she was to make any progress she had to leave the caginess to others. "Mrs. Padilla—Charlotte—was West a man just a little taller than your husband, with brown hair and brown eyes, and slightly stooped shoulders? And a scar along his right cheekbone?"

"A very thin scar."

Eleanor's breath constricted. "Perhaps his name wasn't really West."

Charlotte nodded brightly, as if she had been waiting to hear that. "Perhaps it wasn't." Then she said, "Eleanor, will you excuse me for a moment? I'd like to make a phone call."

She left Eleanor sitting there; as she went, the room opened about Eleanor in ever-widening circles, like ripples rolling out. She felt thrust forward, projected into a welcome web. She was no longer surprised that each mention of Victor West's name produced unexpected results, but all her questions and curiosities were trebly underscored. She found herself clenching the table edge to keep from moving or

shouting; although she didn't know where she would have gone or what she would have said.

Charlotte came back soon, with a reassuring smile. "All set. You're really very sweet to be so patient about all this hocus-pocus. I apologize for it, but matters aren't entirely in my hands. Eleanor, I think it would be a *very* good idea if we had dinner together. Then later tonight we could pay a little call together. Will that be all right?"

How do I know? thought Eleanor. Still, anything will be better than nothing, when the nothing stretches out forever. "Yes. All right."

"Good." She took a new bill from her new bag and put it on the table. "Let's go, shall we? We can have another drink at the restaurant."

Without saying so explicitly, Charlotte was quite firm about what she would and wouldn't discuss; but as if to compensate for an air of mystery which was distasteful and not of her choosing, she was as generally friendly and considerate as possible.

Soon after they were seated at their table in a small and obviously expensive restaurant, she said as much as she was, evidently going to say on the subject of West. "I thought it would be a doubly excellent idea for us to have dinner together tonight, Eleanor. First, there's the fact that it's a great kick for me just to meet and talk to you. Then I thought that after dinner we could go on and meet someone who might interest you."

She said it just as if the whole conversation in the bar had not been a kind of trial to decide whether she was going to make that phone call.

"Is it the person whom you telephoned before?" asked Eleanor.

"Yes, I wanted to see whether she'd be at home this

evening. She's not very well and she doesn't always see people. But she said she'd see you."

"Who is it, Charlotte?" She said the name a bit reluctantly; she felt that she had been just slightly hustled into this close relationship; but she was now forced to use the first name in self-defense.

"My sister-in-law, Señora Sandoval. The lady whom you wanted to see at the hospital today."

"Oh, yes. Not that I know her, or anything about her. The clerk at the hotel gave me her name."

"Those hotels. They're always about ten years behind things. Two and a half years, anyway. Raquel—Señora Sandoval—hasn't been at the hospital for two and a half years."

"Did she work there for a long time before that?"

Charlotte nodded. "Mm-hm. Eight years. After her husband died—and she was left without any children—she went into the hospital to keep busy. She was staff supervisor."

"Then she knew Victor West."

Charlotte fixed her blue eyes on her and nodded once, amiably. "Mm-hm." That was when she changed the subject. "Tell me, Eleanor, have you written anything lately?"

The conversation wound away from Señora Sandoval—and therefore, of course, from Victor West—and Eleanor let it wind, principally because there was nothing else she could do but also because if she at least observed the ritual of talk she was less liable to scream with impatience. From time to time during dinner she found herself clutching her knees under the table, digging her fingers in hard to work off the impulse that would otherwise have been screamed away, to appease the impatience with pain.

In the course of the talk, the personal questions that had occurred to her when she first saw Charlotte must have pressed forward into speech, because when dinner was over she found herself in possession of the answers. Charlotte had met her husband at her doctor's office in New York; Dr.

Padilla had gone there to attend a medical congress and was her doctor's house guest. They had gone out together a few times and he had invited her to stay with him and his mother in Hidalgia for a few weeks in the winter. While she was here he had proposed and been accepted. Five years ago. "I'd buried one husband," said Charlotte, "a Hungarian. Killed in a skiing accident. I wanted to marry again and I knew I could never marry an American. Hidalgia is a bit isolated, perhaps, but it's lovely. Besides we fly around a good deal. We were in New Orleans last month and Aca-pulco last week. I really haven't much to complain about. A charming house. I wish it had been possible for you to see it, but Paddy has his quirks. And since I, God knows, have mine, I respect his."

Toward the end of the meal, as Eleanor doggedly refilled her demi-tasse cup for the fourth time, Charlotte suddenly reached forward and took her hand and chuckled. "You really are a dear. You've listened to me gabble on and you haven't complained a bit. Even though you couldn't be less interested. But, my God," she shrugged, "we had to talk about something while we waited."

Eleanor smiled back at the pleasant, odd face, and forgave her what little there was to forgive.

Presently the restaurant and the chatter and the hours of impatience faded behind, and they were driving out of Hidalgia in Charlotte's roadster. They sped over a smooth, star-roofed road across the plain toward a twinkling village at the foot of the mountains ahead. As they left the ancient compact city and emerged onto the wide, breathy plain, Eleanor felt as if they had shed their old selves. The woman next to her was no longer a mere chattering dinner companion but someone grave and a bit nervous; and she herself was no longer a wretched little bundle of despair and impatience and futility. She was commissioned; on the edge

of discovery. Tonight, she sensed—or hoped she sensed, was a pinnacle.

Or was it only the Martinis and the rich air and the luxurious thick Mexican sky conspiring to defraud her with romantic fallacies? . . . No, this Charlotte was so strained and silent in comparison with the earlier competent Charlotte that, together with the knowledge that all the events of the afternoon had pointed toward this road, that village, Eleanor was sure that something extraordinary awaited. For good or ill. The night boded. The drum tightened.

Just as they reached the outskirts of the village, Charlotte turned off on a side road and stopped alongside a vine-covered wall. They got out and Charlotte rang a bell beside a large door. Soon they heard a shuffling of huaraches across a stone floor and the door was opened by a maid of about eighteen, the prettiest Indian girl Eleanor had seen.

“Good evening, Chavella,” said Charlotte.

“Señora,” the girl smiled and curtsied just enough. “Señora Sandoval expects you.” She preceded them across a musky, flowered courtyard toward a villa with two or three golden windows. As they approached the house, the door was opened by a white-jacketed Indian boy of the girl’s age.

“Good evening, señora,” he said to Charlotte, and nodded brightly at Eleanor.

“Good evening, Isaác,” replied Charlotte; to Eleanor she said, “Isaác is Chavella’s husband. They take care of Señora Sandoval.” The boy grinned, and Chavella, standing near him, blushed and gave her husband a sidelong glance of mock irritation.

Isaác led them into the living room. A woman was sitting in a chair next to a lamp, her finger in a closed book and a silken shawl draped over her shoulders. She rose as they came in. She was about forty; she had black hair touched with frost and a fine, ivory-white Spanish face. Her nose was

high-bridged, with the nostrils flared slightly as if in pride. She had her brother's hands.

"Hello, Raquel darling," said Charlotte, going to her and kissing her cheek. "How are you?"

"Not too distressful today," smiled Señora Sandoval. "Thank you for coming, Charlotte. Is this the lady of whom you spoke?"

"Yes. This is Miss Shafer. Mrs. Sandoval."

"How do you do," said Eleanor, aware that she was staring hard at the woman but unwilling to stop. "It's very good of you to see me, Mrs. Sandoval."

"Not at all, Miss Shafer. I was much interested." Her voice had a kind of tired sympathy in it, as if she had seen something of human frailty and now, past hope or expectation, meant only to get each day's good from each day. "Will you not sit down?"

She gave an order in Spanish to Isaác, who bobbed his head and hurried out of the room. "They still run, don't they?" smiled Charlotte.

"They are still young," said Mrs. Sandoval. "And very anxious to please."

"They're both from Raquel's uncle's hacienda," Charlotte explained to Eleanor. "Raquel liked them and trained them herself. The boy had never even worn shoes until a year ago."

Eleanor didn't know quite what to reply; she nearly said that he managed them very well now. "They certainly have learned quickly."

She suspected that a certain period of polite conversation was supposed to elapse in Mexican society before one got down to the point of the meeting, but she knew that, even if such a rule existed, she would have to breach it. She simply couldn't endure any more waiting and balloon juggling. She felt as if days had elapsed since Charlotte had first phoned her; her nerves were now grated raw.

"Mrs. Sandoval," she said, "I understand that you used to work in your brother's hospital."

The woman looked at her briefly, her large eyes full of an almost sullen understanding, and replied, "Yes. That is so. I was the supervisor of the staff, until about two and a half years ago."

"And," said Eleanor, "you know why I've come to see you."

"Yes." She paused. "You are the first person who has ever come looking for Victor West. While he was here or after he left. You are the first."

"Do you know where he went, Mrs. Sandoval?"

"I wonder," continued Mrs. Sandoval as if Eleanor hadn't spoken, "if it would be possible for you to tell me why you desire to find him."

Eleanor's first impulse was to reply angrily, to ask what difference it made; if she knew where West was, why didn't she say so? Why didn't they *all* say so, instead of parrying with these rabbitry, cautious questions and checks?

. . . But she knew that anger wouldn't help. Her hold was too slight. Mrs. Sandoval could at any time merely shrug her shoulders, say that she knew nothing, and that would be the end of it. She was forced to proceed as her hostess wished.

And that, she saw instantly, meant telling a great deal more than she wanted to tell.

"There is a company, an American company," she began, "which needs to find Victor West." The matter would undoubtedly be pressed so she anticipated the next question and brought out the card with which Roy had provided her. "Here is their card."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Sandoval, taking it as if it might possibly be a dangerous thing and reading the few words with great concentration. "A motion-picture company. You are employed by them, Miss Shafer?"

"No . . . not really. As the lines on the back explain,

I'm a—a kind of deputy for their real representative. He's in Mexico City at the moment and couldn't come himself."

"I see." She read the lines on the reverse side and said again, "I see, but it puzzles me. I cannot understand why a motion-picture company should want to find Victor West."

Eleanor just had time to glance at Charlotte to record her recognition of the familiar question when Isaác came back with a tray. Mrs. Sandoval told him to set it down on the coffee table before the sofa on which her two visitors were seated. He bowed spryly and withdrew, and Mrs. Sandoval said, "Charlotte, will you be good enough to help Miss Shafer?"

There were liqueur bottles on the tray; Eleanor said she would have Cointreau merely because it was as easy to say "yes" as "no" and she thought that taking the glass might help to plant a deeper stake on the slippery slope she felt beneath her; it made her more of a guest to take a drink.

"Thank you," said Eleanor, and sipped it; put down the exquisite little glass; and looked at Mrs. Sandoval. The woman's face was calm enough, was in fact too calm. Even if her breathing hadn't been so rapid, Eleanor would have thought her calmness suspect.

"You asked me," said Eleanor, "why Peerless is looking for Victor West." Mrs. Sandoval nodded. "You probably know the answer. Because Victor West was an assumed name. He was really Earl Seastrom, the flier."

Mrs. Sandoval didn't move or flicker a lash, which was answer enough.

Charlotte said, "Eleanor, do you mind my asking? How do you know?"

"Yes," seconded Mrs. Sandoval, "how do you know?"

Eleanor parted her lips to speak, then looked from one to the other. Then, after a moment which shrank and expanded, she spoke; she told them how she had gone with Roy to Patzcuaro and how they had traced Seastrom to Hua-

pango; and (leaving out Lucas and his threats) how they had learned that Seastrom had changed his name and come to Hidalgo and was possibly working in a hospital.

"So you have no official connection with this company at all, Miss Shafer?" Mrs. Sandoval asked.

"No, I haven't."

"And—as you tell me—you and this Mr. Anderson are recent acquaintances?"

"That's right. We've known each other—oh, I don't know—a week."

"Do you wish me to believe then," said Mrs. Sandoval, bending her head forward politely as if she would oblige if she were asked, albeit reluctantly, "that you have come this distance to Hidalgo and are engaged in this pursuit of Victor West and are submitting yourself to many inconveniences—all for the sake of a chance acquaintanceship of one week's age?"

Quite apart from what she said, something in her tone disturbed Eleanor, something she couldn't place. "Doesn't that seem possible to you, Mrs. Sandoval?"

Mrs. Sandoval answered with intense quiet. "If you wish me to believe it, certainly I shall, Miss Shafer. So I ask you again: you wish me to believe that you have no reason of your own for finding Victor West?"

Now Eleanor knew. It was the tone of a jealous woman. It was the tone the wife always used in plays when she was talking civilly to the "other woman."

Obviously Mrs. Sandoval knew nothing of her innermost, unspoken thoughts. This suspicion of a personal reason must be her own invention and only accidentally true. Now Eleanor saw, as if they had just deepened, the fine lines in the corners of the eyes and mouth, the hollows of the cheeks and temples where the skin was stretched taut.

She didn't want to lie outright. A swift sense warned her that this interview wasn't going to be a matter of reason,

of simple question and answer. She might eventually have to rely on a frank unprotected appeal, and she had better keep the truth in reserve against that moment. She decided to equivocate now. "What possible reason of my own could there be, Mrs. Sandoval?"

"I'm sure I do not know, and I am not pressing you to tell me. I don't wish to pry into your affairs." Then strongly: "But neither do I wish—" She halted and began again. "Did you ever know Victor West?"

"No. I saw Earl Seastrom once. When I was eleven years old. In the welcoming parade in New York."

The woman's eyes lighted with the first hint of warmth. "You were there? You saw that?"

"Really, Eleanor?" Charlotte leaned forward too. "You saw the parade? How fascinating!"

It was curious, how the mention of her scant knowledge of the hero at his height had warmed the room. Señora Sandoval, thought Eleanor, reacted like a woman who meets someone who knew her husband as a child.

"Oh, I saw him only for about half a second. I had to jump in the air and look over the heads of a lot of people as he passed by." A strange coin to have secreted then, to be able to spend now. But she would make the most of it. "This picture company wants to find him so that they can use his story in a collection of great flying exploits. I suppose things like the parade would be in the movie." Mrs. Sandoval's eyes darted away and her head turned in thought. What a beautiful woman she almost still is, Eleanor observed, looking at the proud delicate profile.

"Mrs. Sandoval," she said, "wouldn't it be possible for you simply to tell me whether or not you know where he is? Among other things, it will be greatly to his advantage. They'll give him several thousand dollars. Do you know where he is?"

Mrs. Sandoval studied the fringe of her shawl and didn't

answer. "The money is not of first importance. I do not think he would be particularly concerned about the money. I think he would be concerned about the idea of being in a picture. But I do not know *how* he would be concerned; favorably or otherwise. I cannot tell."

"Wouldn't it be possible for me to see him and find out? Or to learn where he is so that Mr. Anderson can see him?"

"And not knowing this," she continued, unheeding, "I do not know whether I care to take a step that might—"

"Please!" Eleanor burst out. "Will you please not simply disregard my questions, Mrs. Sandoval? Do you know where he is? Won't you please tell me that?"

The Mexican lady turned her face back slowly toward Eleanor. A thin smile came upon her thin mouth. "Yet," she said so calmly that it underlined Eleanor's outburst and made her comment more ironic, "yet you insist that this is merely a matter of business with you? You are merely doing your friend a service by making this inquiry."

Eleanor looked down at the clenched fists in her lap and saw that she was sitting on the edge of the sofa. As if to admit that Mrs. Sandoval had made her point, she didn't bother to unclench her fists or lean back. It was the second time today that this had happened. She had betrayed her personal interest that afternoon to Charlotte and now Mrs. Sandoval had seen it.

It was silly to keep up this business pretense. She knew she didn't look like the kind of person a big company would entrust, directly or indirectly, with its affairs; she felt ludicrous and fraudulent in the role of commercial emissary. Besides, both of them now knew—and Mrs. Sandoval had suspected from the start (*How?*)—that the business reason was at most an additional motive. She had much better speak her own language; rip the gag of sly reticence from her mouth and use the truth which she had held in reserve.

The room seemed to grow very small. "Mrs. Sandoval," she made the words carefully and put them forward the way the women at the markets laid out their wares, "this matter of Victor West is evidently something close and personal to you. If—if I admit that—in a way—it's become something personal to me, if I tell you something I haven't told anyone else, will you let me know where he is?"

As she spoke, the other woman's face lighted swiftly with an ivory flame. "Ah! I knew!" said Mrs. Sandoval, seemingly drawing in her breath as she spoke. "I knew before even you had said anything. I could tell this. I knew that this business was merely pretext! I knew you had reasons of your own!" Her assumed calm had cracked suddenly and completely; her breath, which had been rapid all along, came even faster. "I knew you had a secret purpose—some reason—to invade—to take away—" She half rose from her chair, one hand groping at the air. "But it will not be. I will not allow it. I will not. I have nothing else left. At least this I keep—this I will—"

"Raquel! Dearest!" exclaimed Charlotte and hurried to her. She was frightened as well as anxious, as if (thought Eleanor) this was not only unexpected but something she had never seen before. "Dearest, you mustn't excite yourself this way." She soothed the woman back into the chair. "Dearest, you mustn't let yourself get overwrought."

Mrs. Sandoval subsided, her eyes fixed in mid-air a little to one side of Eleanor's face, her hand still groping weakly, her face a picture of pain present and remembered.

"You mustn't," repeated Charlotte softly. And, as the woman settled back, "There. That's better. Much better. Now let me get you something to drink."

"No." Mrs. Sandoval shook her head more times than was necessary. Then she put the back of her hand to her cheek until her breathing had slowed a little. When she spoke her voice was quieter though not quite self-possessed.

"I am sorry, Miss Shafer. I do not mean to shout at a guest. It is—many things."

"I'm sorry too, Mrs. Sandoval," replied Eleanor. Her voice seemed to come from inside a frozen image of herself, as if the unfair, advantageous fact of the woman's illness had overwhelmed and disarmed her. "I know you're ill. I didn't mean to upset you."

"If it's anyone's fault, it's mine," said Charlotte promptly, stroking Mrs. Sandoval's brow. "I shouldn't have brought Miss Shafer here. It's not her fault, it's mine. Old bull-in-a-china-shop Charlotte. Always ramming into things. I shouldn't ever have phoned you about it, dearest."

"No," said Mrs. Sandoval again, again shaking her head, "I wanted to see her. She was the first who had ever come looking for him. I wanted to see her. I wanted to know why." Her hands once more gripped the arms of her chair. She looked up at Charlotte. "It is all right, Charlotte. I am all right now. Thank you, dear."

Charlotte frowned at her a moment, then sat down near-by.

"Miss Shafer," said Mrs. Sandoval, her eyes returning to Eleanor's face like inquisitors to their victim, "you offered to tell me. Now you must tell me."

"All right." At the bottom of Eleanor's mind was a base of bewilderment, a puzzle about why this woman had suspected her from the start, and why the confirmation of her suspicion had made her momentarily frantic. Or, properly, why it had been possible to calm her only temporarily. But whatever the reason, the contract had been made and had now to be fulfilled, for her own sake as well as Mrs. Sandoval's. "I will."

"Would you like me to wait outside?" asked Charlotte, moving to rise.

No, it was because of Charlotte that she was here. Be-

sides, Charlotte would undoubtedly hear anyway, sooner or later. "No. Not for my sake, at least," said Eleanor.

Mrs. Sandoval didn't even bother to reply. She kept her eyes on Eleanor.

"Some time ago," said Eleanor, "I suppose it was only two weeks ago—something happened in my life. The details don't matter. After it happened, I came down to Mexico. I know now—I didn't know then—that I was running away. After I got here, I learned that something else had happened at home, an unfortunate situation which I—only I—could set right. But to do it—to go back and do it—meant disclosing my connection with the first thing. And that first thing was such that I—I—

"Well," she said quietly, "I couldn't do it. Although I knew I ought to. Although I knew I was the only living person who could. And I realized then something that had been true of me all my life. The heat of this decision had boiled it up out of hiding to where I could see it. I was a coward. Not a silly kind of coward, afraid of pain or punishment or even death. The worst kind. The kind that knows what ought to be done and can't do it, not for fear of death but for fear of losing life as it is. An immoral coward."

She thought: I would never be able to say these things, to cast them out of my brain into the air, if it were not for her eyes fixed steadily on me helping to shut out everything else, providing a lane down which my words travel like a plane on a signal. I thank you and hate you and come back to thanking you, she thought.

"Then, as I told you, I met Roy Anderson; and simply for want of anything else to do—because I had to do something or really go mad—I went with him looking for Earl Seastrom. At Patzcuaro we found out that he'd been a brawling drunkard. But a hint—a tone of voice more than anything—made me suspect that he'd been more than just someone who'd grown nasty because the spotlight had shifted,

that something had been gnawing at him. And down at Huapango, from what Quinn told us, under the facts I sensed something of a man who'd been running away. A coward—like myself. But one who'd managed somehow to stop and face around toward the thing he'd been running from and start back. I—I somehow felt that we were alike—up to a point. And I wanted to find him, to see whether he really had gone back all the way. I wanted to know whether it had been done and how it had been done. But mostly whether or not. I wanted to see him, to speak to him—in a manner of speaking, to touch him. For a talisman.

"Possibly farfetched," she continued. "Maybe entirely imaginary. But, Mrs. Sandoval, you were right about me from the start, though I don't know how. I *have* a reason of my own. There it is."

Having finished, she pulled back, as it were, from Mrs. Sandoval's eyes and looked at all of her face. And she knew, at once and irrevocably, that even if she never learned the actual facts, her feelings about Seastrom were true. She had hit the nail.

"Now," she said, "may I know where he is?"

Mrs. Sandoval began by nodding, but not in reply. "I suspected. From the first I suspected. And now I know. More than you know—about yourself."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Sandoval?"

"All that you have just told me I see against matters you do not comprehend. They show to me more of yourself than you can yet see." With a weak but determined gesture, she clutched the arm of her chair. "And you shall *not* see."

Charlotte, who had grown pensive during Eleanor's story, looked nervously at Mrs. Sandoval.

Eleanor said quietly, hollowly, "Does that mean you won't tell me where he is? Even now?"

"Even now? But certainly not now!" Suddenly Mrs. Sandoval rose and put her hand to her cheek and began to

pace. This was the first that Eleanor had seen her move. There were traces still left in the sick woman of the easy, silk panther; in her step there was something of the quality of an old dance, formal grace with passion beneath it.

She turned at the end of the room. "Oh, I don't know," she said, shaking her head. Then looking back at Eleanor, "Why did you come? Why did you have to come? Why could you not at least wait until I was dead? Could I not have been left this?"

Charlotte said, "Raquel, darling, don't. Please don't—"

"No, let me." She stopped her with a gesture of both hands. "Listen, you must let me. I must say. There is never a chance to say." She came back to Eleanor. "It has all been mine, all the sorrow of this, all the remembrance, the pride. Nothing else—not a hand to hold, not even a letter now in two years. All I have had is that remembrance, kept for me alone, entire. And now you come in, you walk in from the railroad station and you say in your nice polite way, 'Please do not keep your most private possession to yourself. Please let me have some. Do not be selfish.' I am to hold out my hand and give it."

She began to cry as she spoke; little sobs laced her speech. "And you think—you think the surest way to make me share this is to tell me your need for him, and because it is genuine, that will open all doors. You do not know, you do not know, little young girl, that this is exactly why I cannot tell you. If it had been business, if it had been just something, a trifle, to see him, to ask yes or no, I might have considered. But to come to me and to say 'Tell me this so that I may not only intrude, I may stay, so that I may plant roots deep in what is yours, that I may speak to him in your special language, that I may drive you out before you are dead,' to say to me this . . ."

She halted. Her mouth trembled. She took the ends of her shawl in her hands and folded her arms across her

breast. "I am sorry," she said, her eyes tearful. "I do not like to speak like this to a guest. I cannot help you. You will have to go. Please understand. I am very sorry," she said, crying. "I like you. I can see you are not ordinary. But I must hate you, I cannot do anything else, I wish you would go, I cannot help it. I am not well," she sobbed, "you must excuse me. But I cannot let someone else have the—the only things—I—I—" Her hand covered her mouth, and the little sobs shook her.

Charlotte rose to go to her.

"No," Mrs. Sandoval said quickly, "I cannot, no. Perhaps it is wrong, too, to ask it. I—I— Oh, please forgive me!" she exclaimed and, crying still, ran from the room.

CHAPTER TWELVE

They started back to the city as soon as Charlotte had helped Chavella put Mrs. Sandoval to bed and had given her a sedative. Eleanor very nearly apologized for what had happened, but after considering it carefully and determinedly selfishly, she said only, "I'm sorry that she was so upset."

"Well," replied Charlotte, a casual hand on the wheel as she lighted a cigarette, "so am I. Poor darling. *Real* darling. But—she wanted to see you. She had to see you, I suppose. So, in a way, it was unavoidable."

The stars were still there. The luxuriant night still hung around them. But the world looked quite different, thought Eleanor, going back.

"I should have known," said Charlotte quietly, "that Eleanor Shafer wasn't just a commercial traveler." Her usually forthright voice had a touch of embarrassment in it, but she plowed ahead stubbornly despite it. It was as if she admitted that there was bound to be some shyness now that they were left alone after what had just happened, so it might as well be disposed of swiftly. "Should have known

that you had some other reason for being interested in all this."

Eleanor, huddled in her corner of the seat, one arm stretched along the top of the car door, felt cloudy and cold and, like Señora Sandoval, on the edge of tears. But she couldn't afford to indulge herself; time was running out. She didn't know whether she'd ever see Charlotte again after they parted at the hotel, and she simply couldn't leave matters as they stood—not only from the standpoint of finding Seastrom but for her own sanity, to stave off sleepless months to come. She had to strike at once. . . .

"Charlotte, I'm sorry, I don't like to press—but—"

"I know," Charlotte nodded quickly, "you must be in a terrible state. I don't know *what* I'd make of things if I were you. I might possibly be a little angry with me. Though I hope you're not."

"No. No, I suppose you couldn't tell me anything before. You had to leave things to her. But now—well, Charlotte, would it be entirely fair—"

"No," Charlotte agreed decisively, "neither to you nor to her. After all, you're more than merely inquisitive about all this. And as for Raquel—well, I happen to love her dearly, so it's a matter of pride with me that you shouldn't think her just a—hysterical neurasthenic. No, I can't leave it this way; and since Raquel said as much as she did, there's no reason why I should leave it this way." She continued hastily: "Don't get me wrong—I don't mean I'm going to tell you where he is. I can't. Because I don't know. And that's the straight truth. But as for the rest . . . Well, Eleanor, even if I can't tell you his whereabouts, do you still want to hear the rest?"

Eleanor blinked slowly, a heartbeat. "Yes."

"All *right*." She took a breath and studied the road ahead. "Well, let's see. I suppose you've gathered that Raquel was in love with Victor West."

"Is still in love with him."

"Is still in love with him," agreed Charlotte. "She is also extremely and incurably ill. I'd tell you how short her expectation of life is but I honestly don't like to say it aloud. Also, she didn't know she was ill while he was here. All these," she said, "are a few things you ought to know first, sort of background facts."

Eleanor nodded. She was too tense to notice the depth of the excitement that was opening in her as Charlotte spoke. She clung tightly to the nexus of attention that kept her completely present, beside this woman and listening.

"Let's see," said Charlotte. "How to begin. I've never told this story before and— Well, I guess my first recollection of Victor West is hearing Raquel mention the name. It was, oh, two months or so after the volcano trouble started. I suppose you know we had a volcano erupting practically in our back yard four years ago?"

"Yes, I know."

"Well, as you might expect, there were a lot of casualties—everyone at the hospital was working overtime. For two weeks I never even saw Paddy. When he wasn't at the hospital, I was working at the nursery, and so forth. Well, even in the midst of all that, when everybody was doing four or five times his regular stint, I remember Raquel telling me one day—remember it so clearly—that they'd taken on a new orderly at the hospital, an American, who was doing remarkably well. Working very hard. At a time when the exception was the rule. And I asked her his name, because no one's real to me unless I know his name.

"A couple of days later I saw him for the first time. I was helping out in the kitchen at the hospital and I'd come upstairs to do something or other—serve soup or something—and on a landing of the stairs there was an emergency cot with an old man lying on it. He'd been horribly burned, I think, hardly an inch of him left unbandaged. And there was

this orderly sitting on the edge of the bed feeding him. One arm around the old man's shoulders holding him up. The minute I saw them as I came up the stairs—even before I got closer and could see he was an American—I knew this was the orderly Raquel had mentioned to me; and something about the picture, even with a thousand heartbreaking things every day, something about it seemed especially touching. I don't know why even yet. And as I passed him, I heard him saying—quite gently, mind you—'Come on, you poor beat-up old bastard. One more spoonful—just to spite the graveyard.' Somehow it almost made me cry. He said it so gently. And the old man didn't understand a word, of course. . . .

"After that I began to notice him more and more. I suppose, actually, I was looking for him. He was always busy whenever I saw him, but he never seemed to be hurrying. He had a funny sort of walk. He's fairly tall, you know, and broad, but slightly stoop-shouldered, and his walk had almost a—well, hobble is an ugly word and it'll give you the wrong impression—but it just wasn't a free and easy stride. He had a soft, kind of self-mocking smile and the heaviest saddest brown eyes. And I noticed his hands too. They never quite hung at his sides; always as if they were just about to come forward and pick up something. But nice hands; they looked, well, comfortable."

"Had his hair changed?"

"Gone gray, you mean? Just touches . . . over the ears. But he didn't look middle-aged. He looked like—like a young man grown older. I mean when you looked at him you could see what he'd looked like before."

"Yes," said Eleanor.

Charlotte gave her a swift sidelong glance. "Yes. Well, Raquel mentioned him frequently to me—the way he worked, the amount of volunteering he did, and a quiet manner of his that impressed her. She was very curious about him. She once said she wished she wasn't his superior so that

she could talk to him. I could understand why; it was provocative, an American working down in here as an orderly. In addition to the fact that he looked intriguing personally.

"Well, a month or so after the volcano business was cleared up and I wasn't going to the hospital any more, I began to notice that Raquel wasn't talking about her pet orderly any more. Next time I saw her I asked her whether he'd left; she said no, and changed the subject. I thought perhaps she was displeased with him or that she'd spoken to him and found out that his outside was more interesting than his inside. Or some such thing.

"Then one night I went to the movies alone while Paddy was out of town—something which always shocks the well-bred Mexican ladies a little. After the picture I decided to drop in and see Raquel. She had an apartment in town in those days. As I went up the stairs to her apartment, I passed Victor West coming down."

She may be embarrassed about this, thought Eleanor, but I'm not, I feel happy. Dead and done with though it is, I suddenly feel as if his life had flowered. I wish we weren't driving, I wish we were sitting somewhere across a table so I could see her funny pleasant face and blue eyes while she tells me this. I wish I could have the double pleasure of listening and watching her too. . . .

"Without my saying anything specific," Charlotte continued, "Raquel soon knew that I knew. And as time went on and she saw I wasn't shocked or scandalized, she began to talk to me about him a little. As far as I could make out, he was a fellow with great cavernous silences in him, a man who was whatever an ostensibly unhappy life had made him and who expected you to take him as he was or not at all; and didn't much care which. In a nice way, you understand. All he seemed to want, really, was to keep on working at that menial hospital job.

"And, strangely enough, this was something like

Raquel's feeling. She'd had an unhappy marriage—one of those arranged things foisted on her by her father when she was eighteen—and she hadn't even had children to compensate. After her husband died, she'd gone to work in Paddy's hospital to see whether she could find a little happiness by working for people. Now West had come along—she'd hired him, as a matter of fact—and now for the first time in her life she was in love. And I certainly couldn't blame her, considering her past and considering West—who was fascinating, I thought, without really wanting to be.

"I met him from time to time at the hospital, where he was always quite deferential, of course, though not quite seriously so. Then Raquel paid me the compliment of having me to tea at her place one day while he was there; it meant, so to speak, that they accepted my knowing about them. Raquel was a little overserious—I suppose because she wasn't quite comfortable; but he—oh, he was quite at his ease, sort of polite and sad and companionable. Raquel said that she'd spent the afternoon trying to persuade him to become her assistant but that he'd refused; he preferred to remain an orderly. Well, I was curious and—bashful me—I asked him if he'd mind telling me why. He smiled that soft two-edged smile and made some flip, sliding reply—I think he said he didn't want to pay higher income tax. It was such a purposely silly answer that I got the feeling there was a good solid reason underneath and so I wasn't peeved.

"I never did learn the exact answer.

"I remember one other thing about that afternoon. An opinion I never changed. I got the impression that he liked Raquel very much, respected her, possibly even loved her a little; and that she loved him very much."

They were well out on the plain by now, suspended in the dark between the jewels of the village and the city. The air rushing by on either side pressed in on them and took on shape, so that they seemed to be traveling down a narrow

cave with the lights of the world instarred above. Eleanor felt as if the other woman were leaning back like herself, not driving, and that the two of them had floated out of the present into the past-future.

"Right about that time," said Charlotte thoughtfully, "I get the sequence of things mixed up. I can't remember which came first: the epidemic or Paddy's discovery of—what was going on. No, I guess Paddy's discovery came second, just after the epidemic started. You see, all the volcano uproar had wrecked sanitation and water supplies in the towns and villages around here, and when typhoid broke out a couple of months later, it spread like fury. The poor Indians roundabout were dropping like flies. And there simply weren't enough doctors and nurses and serum and equipment to cope.

"Well, in the middle of all that, Paddy found out about his sister and Victor West. I don't know to this day *how* he found out, but things like that can't be kept quiet forever—not in a world with people in it. And Paddy had a real simon-pure old Castilian reaction to it. I was surprised. He wanted to take the family rapier down off the wall and run the varlet through. I was really a little shocked but also, to be perfectly truthful, if it hadn't been Raquel and Victor, I'd also have been a little thrilled. I mean, all that virility and honor. I thought all that sort of thing was dead.

"But, thank Heaven, there wasn't time for rapiers. Paddy was enough of a doctor to be a doctor before he was a brother. Besides, the Teztlaca situation came up. Teztlaca is a village way up in the hills, and really in the hills. No electricity, nothing resembling a sanitation system, and a road that a very small car can just about get through. Well, word came down that Teztlaca had been hit by typhoid worse than any other place around; and there simply wasn't a doctor or trained nurse to spare. Even with all the people the

federal government and the American Red Cross had sent in, there simply wasn't an extra man.

"Then Paddy, who thought he was being clever, the dog," she smiled wryly, "asked for a volunteer among the orderlies, someone who would just go up there into that pesthole and at least get the dead buried and the sick in separate beds. He knew what Victor West's hospital work had been like and he knew darned well the only one who would volunteer. And when Raquel heard about Paddy's request, she realized immediately that he'd found out about her and Victor. Well, she did her best privately to make Victor change his mind; she even told him what Paddy's motive was. But Victor only grinned and said he supposed that, from Paddy's point of view, he was entitled to a crack at him. Besides, crack or not, the Teztlaca situation remained; and no one else had volunteered; and someone had to go.

"Raquel was a lot more self-controlled in those days; she knew the man she was dealing with and she accepted the situation. But she almost went out of her mind in the two weeks he was up there. If Paddy hadn't been working day and night, taking every bit as much of a chance himself, I think I—I could have disliked him rather severely just then.

"Well," she tossed her cigarette away, "when the doctors finally got to Teztlaca to relieve Victor, they had to bring him out on a stretcher. He'd been working for two weeks almost without sleep, without proper food—slaving to do what he could for those people. Most of them died, but the handful who came through owe it to him. That softened Paddy a bit; he was willing to make concessions in Victor's favor. He was willing to let his sister marry this 'commoner' and he could gloss over that fact, he thought, by giving him Raquel's job. Of course she was to go back to her home as a married woman should. He even unbent so far as to make

the offer to Victor personally, right at his bedside in the hospital."

"But it was declined," said Eleanor.

"No, he accepted," replied Charlotte, with an upward inflection which indicated that she had been surprised too. "Not with all the gratitude that Paddy would have liked, but he accepted. I don't need to tell you how Raquel felt, and I felt the same way. Even Paddy wasn't too displeased."

"What happened?" asked Eleanor. "Something must have happened after that."

"Something sure as shooting did. As soon as Victor was on his feet again, the mayor of Teztlaca—a lot of these little villages have more officials than otherwise—the mayor arranged a surprise celebration as a token of appreciation. Victor didn't know anything about it. One afternoon a nurse simply went into the ward where he was working and led him out into the courtyard where most of the staff had lined up. Paddy and Raquel and I were there. And the mayor made a speech and presented Victor with a scroll.

"He stood rather wooden and aloof through the speech, I remember, as if it were all happening to someone else. Then he unrolled the scroll and read it aloud. It was in Spanish, of course, and though his Spanish was fair, it wasn't quick. He read through until he got to the word 'héroe'—hero. Then he stopped and stared at the scroll, oh, it seemed a long time, though it was probably only about half a minute. We thought he was overwhelmed or embarrassed or something of the sort. But then he began to shake all over, like a man with a fever. And before we quite realized what had happened, he'd torn the scroll in half, thrown it to the ground, and walked out of the courtyard.

"Well, we all thought that he was still weak and overwrought, not quite responsible for what he did. And Raquel went to his rooms to tell him everything was all right—he

had a place at a boardinghouse a few streets away—but he wasn't there. He didn't show up for four days.

"He'd been on a toot. He turned up smelling of every pulquería in town and he was delirious for two days after he got back. When he came to, the first thing he did was to tell Raquel that he couldn't marry her. And since that was the case, he thought he'd better leave Hidalgia; he'd only make it difficult for everyone concerned if he stayed.

"I confess I was considerably more than puzzled when Raquel told me. As much by the *way* she told me as by anything else. She seemed almost—proud. I asked her whether she had the faintest idea of what was bothering him, why he couldn't or wouldn't settle down here—you see, I'd figured it was part of whatever had made him want to be an orderly in the first place. Raquel said she had something more than a faint idea, but all she could tell me was that his name wasn't Victor West. She told me—who he really was." Charlotte seemed reluctant to utter the name even now, even here with her in the car. "And she told me that, after he'd explained things to her, when she came to look at it from his point of view, she could see that if he married her he wouldn't be the man she wanted to marry.

"If that confuses you," smiled Charlotte, "just think how I felt. Still feel. Although I have a sort of vague idea . . .

"And although I have a pretty clear idea of the kind of woman Raquel is.

"Well," she continued, "she found him a job somewhere else—she had some contacts through the hospital—but she's the only one who knows where it is. And in a couple of days he left. Quietly.

"Paddy was furious when he heard. He hasn't got over it yet. Never will. Says if he ever sees him or finds out where he is he'll kill him. You see, as far as he knows, Victor ran out on his sister without warning, and after the unbending it took for Paddy to consent to the marriage at all, that straw

really broke the camel's back. That's why he's so virulent on the subject."

They were back in the city now, winding through the darkened streets. Occasionally when they passed a lighted window or a cantina whose shutters were still up, laughter and music poured out loudly and briefly as if a bucket had been spilled on them.

Eleanor asked, "Has she ever heard from West?"

"A few times, in the first few months. But then he wrote and said he thought he'd better stop that too. She had hoped that someday he might come back, but it was just about then that she discovered she was ill. And then she knew she didn't want him back. She quit her job. She bought that little house we were at tonight, and she's just been living there ever since. Waiting to die."

Eleanor was quiet, content to let silence seal the conclusion. But Charlotte seemed conscious of having ended on a dramatic note and was a little uncomfortable about it because soon she said, in a quite different tone, "Well, we're almost back. Quick trip."

"Charlotte," said Eleanor gently, "don't be afraid, I'm not going to dwell on this. But I just want to say that I'm grateful to you. For telling me. It means—a great deal to me."

Charlotte shrugged. "Figured it would. That's why I told you."

"I—I'd just like to ask one question, if I may. . . . He never mentioned any specific reason why he couldn't stay? He never said what it was that was bothering him? What he wanted to do?"

"Not that I know of, Eleanor. And if Raquel knows, she's never told me. However, it's been an interesting subject for speculation on some of these long tropical nights. Why that man should have changed his name and taken that

kind of job and then, when he had a chance to settle down—" She broke off. "You don't happen to know, by any chance?"

"No, I don't."

They came to a halt now outside the Hotel Fundador, and her perspective changed back as always after a swift trip in a car; the tempo of the earth resumed. She took a deep breath as if it were a different air. "Thank you, Charlotte," she said. "For everything. Thank you very much."

"No hay de qué," smiled Charlotte briskly, "as we neo-Mexicans say. It isn't every day that one of my favorite young poets passes through town. Besides—well, after all, I heard what you told Raquel. I felt, in a way, that I owed you something. Anyway, what are you thanking me for? I don't know that I've helped you any. What are you going to do now?"

"I'll have to think. So much has happened today, I'll have to try to digest it and think. All I know is that my whole feeling is—is—" She shook her head slightly. "I suppose I'll have to call Roy Anderson in the morning. To tell him I've reached a dead end. And then go back to Mexico City."

"You can't go tomorrow before eleven-thirty, that's the first train."

"Is it?"

"Maybe I'll call you in the morning, shall I? Maybe I could come over and see you before you go. Take you to the station, perhaps. H'mm?"

"That would be fine." She put her hand on the door handle and paused. "One thing still puzzles me about tonight, Charlotte. How did she know right away that I wasn't calling just—just for business reasons? Why did she suspect something else from the start? How could she have known?"

Charlotte nodded. "That puzzled me too. Eleanor, I don't think she really knew anything. I think she'd have been suspicious of anyone—particularly any woman—who came looking for West. She's not quite—herself any more.

All she has left, as she says, is that particular segment of her life. And she guards the gate to it jealously. She's the only one who knows how to get in, and she sort of shoots first and asks questions afterward. It's merely accident that in your case she happened to be right." She touched Eleanor's arm. "Don't feel too bad about having upset her."

"I don't," said Eleanor. "I think I made her happy."

A frown flew across Charlotte's face, then she nodded in quick comprehension. "Oh, I see. If I treasure something and you reach for it, it's a kind of reassurance that it's valuable. Especially if a lot of time has passed by." She nodded again. "I see."

It had been a long day and Eleanor was tired, but she couldn't sleep. She changed into a negligee, then went out and sat on the little private balcony of her room. The city below seemed tired, like herself, but the jabs of light and sound that pricked the night were evidence that it, too, couldn't quite sleep.

What held her, what persisted in her brain, was the fact that, out of the mass of conjectures and hints and bits of information which had been all she'd had to go on until now, today's happenings had evoked the figure of a man, dimensional and urgent. Before this she hadn't quite been able to see Seastrom as a person. When she had thought of him she had imagined someone about whom the facts of Seastrom's life were true and in a more or less vague way she had attached Seastrom's (young) face to this unclear figure. Now she felt that she would have known the sound of his voice, his way of speaking, his manner of sitting and standing and smoking, his handshake. The data and statistics had now been enclosed in a man.

The incarnation was so vivid that she began not to feel alone there on the balcony; so she cautioned herself: I must be careful. I don't want to be carried away by fancy,

I don't want to muddle what I've been trying so desperately to keep lucid and sane. This whole matter has been so fragile, it's been hard to keep from amplifying it more than the facts justify. I don't want to lose control now; now that some of the things which I felt were true have been proved true.

But he had become so real to her that it was difficult to draw a line between what she knew and what she sensed. Today she had been given, on one hand, the facts of what had happened in Hidalgo, by Charlotte, and, on the other hand, she had seen in Señora Sandoval at least the partial effect of those facts; and the feelings that linked the two in her were as trenchant as anything that had ever happened directly in her own life. She understood the love of the melancholy, resigned señora for this taciturn man who had asked no favors and sought discomforts; she understood his affection for this mature, comprehending and beautiful woman, a harbor in a hateful world. She could see, too, how he had been tempted to remain here in that harbor—to marry her and live comfortably and forget the struggle, to tell himself that he had done enough. And she could also understand terribly well the moment in which the suspicion in him had burst into certainty; when he had known that he had been deluding himself, that he had to go on to conclude—whatever it was in his past that was unfinished. . . . Why, suppose that someone loved *her* and wanted to marry her, suppose she could now be protected and safe. How long could that safety drug her before the iron facts in New Gilead harrowed through to the quick of her being?

Even at this late date and unknown to him, she felt curiously proud of him. . . .

But instead of that, it would be much more to the point, she observed, to decide what I'm going to do. In the pleasure and warmth of discovering the man *qua* man, she had forgotten the unpleasant truth that her own search

was baffled; stopped. She knew where the key to the future lay, but how could she possibly wrest it from Señora Sandoval against her will? How could she go back to the woman to whom those facts were so much more than facts—and insist? But if she didn't, if she failed to pursue things to a conclusion, of what use was everything she had done and thought up to now? What was the *point* of feeling close to Seastrom unless the matter was followed through, unless she could find him and find out whether and how he had succeeded? At present it was all like a reasonably well-tended garden; to stop now would be to let it run to weeds and lose everything put in up to now plus the possible harvest ahead.

And of course there was Roy's interest too. . . .

Why not turn it over to Roy? He could come up here and see Señora Sandoval without arousing any emotional reaction in her. He could talk to her simply as a businessman and get impersonal informative answers to impersonal questions. After all, she thought, she needn't feel hesitant about turning it back to him. Her trip had been far from a failure; she had accomplished a good deal for one day. She could step aside now and . . .

Look, she almost said aloud, you're supposed to be learning something from this Seastrom business. You're doing it supposedly to find out how a man took hold of himself. What better time to start on yourself than in the search for that man? Suppose you went back and saw Señora Sandoval tomorrow? . . . Well, what would it prove?

Answer: At least that, for once, she hadn't stepped aside.

Well! she thought suddenly with a glow of pleasure. Here I am arguing with myself. I care. A week ago it would have been impossible, incredible. . . .

A week ago, too, she would have been ashamed of this resurgence of interest in her, she would have attempted to bury it and deny its existence. Even now she felt guilty about it, as if she had no right or title to pleasure or vitality.

She thought of Ralph; and she thought of the cold, cynical lie. She thought of her home, the light and haven removed from reality to remembrance. . . . And so, after a moment, she continued: If I *am* stronger, I'll apply the strength where I owe it. I'll go back and see Sandoval tomorrow, I'll try again. . . . It really isn't much to do. I'd better stop dwelling on it before I begin to consider it a victory.

Then she deliberately thought of Ralph again; to hurt herself, to punish herself for the gratification she'd felt in making the decision, and for her pleasure in coming to know the stranger Seastrom. And as always when she thought of Ralph the ice crawled up around her heart; but this time her brain didn't whirl. This time she could look within and say: There's the pain; there's the pain; but there are its boundaries.

Since the morning train left at eleven-thirty, Eleanor calculated that if she started at nine she could go out to Señora Sandoval's villa and be back in time. Before she went she wired Roy that things were promising but that there was nothing definite; then she hired a taxi and with the doorman's help conveyed to the driver where she wanted to go.

The sun had changed the plain from a sunken sea teased by stars into a luxuriant tableland of farms, a live and thriving countryside oozing prosperity and juices. It was hard to believe that this was the same plain, that the only difference was sunlight. They passed dozens of well-kept truck farms, the principal crop of which was onions. Long row after row of the green tubes stretched down the fields, like combs set teeth-upward in the soil. The difference in the landscape made her feel for a moment that she was going at the wrong time, she ought perhaps to have waited for night again when the approach and atmosphere would be more congenial and fitting.

She tapped the driver's shoulder when they came to the turn-off and again when they reached the house. She got out and indicated, especially by not paying, that he was to wait. She rang the bell in the wall and soon the garden gate was opened by Chavella.

"Buenos días, Chavella."

The girl's pretty brown dimpled face bloomed. "Oh! Señorita! Allo!"

"La Señora Sandoval, please."

Chavella looked momentarily grave, then said, "Allo, allo," again and gestured for Eleanor to follow her. They went across the garden into the house and Chavella ushered her into the living room. She patted a chair cushion for Eleanor, said "Momentito," and scurried out.

Eleanor looked around the room, recognizing the chair in which Mrs. Sandoval had sat, the coffee table, the bold-patterned rug, all infused for her with what had happened here last night. She wondered now, in a moment of panic, whether she had been right to come again, and if so, whether it would have been better to formulate a plan instead of merely throwing herself on the woman's mercy. But there was no plan possible. The only thing that would help was if, since last night, the woman had reconsidered, if Eleanor's reappearance here would in itself effect the change.

There were quick footsteps in the hall and Eleanor's panic flared again. Dr. Padilla came in. For a moment he halted in surprise. Then he said, "Good morning," bowing stiffly as he advanced. His angry eyes were a little bloodshot this morning.

"Dr. Padilla," she said, barely avoiding a stammer. "I didn't expect to see you."

"I dare say." He halted crisply before her chair like a private reporting to an officer. "Let us not waste time, eh? I do not know how you found my sister's house, Miss

Shafer, but it does not do you any good, because you cannot see her."

Then Charlotte nor anyone else had told him about last night. She must be careful not to betray them. "Dr. Padilla, it is most important that I—"

"My sister cannot help you. She knows no more about the matter you are interested in than I do. Besides, she does not wish to see you."

And if they hadn't told him about her visit, then this was a lie. "How do you know, doctor?"

The doctor clamped his jaws and flushed. "Miss Shafer, I am not for debate. I tell you only you may not see my sister. I am her physician and she is ill. I do not wish her to be disturbed."

"But it wouldn't be for long."

"It shall not be at all."

"Well, may I come back later? Tomorrow? It's most—"

"Definitely not. She is ill and may not be disturbed for a long time to come. Also," he added coldly, "she will be indisposed whenever you choose to call. I shall leave orders, physician's orders. If you choose to disregard them, there will be consequences. Legal consequences. I am well known in Hidalgo. You are a stranger."

This was the man who loathed Seastrom, all right, who wanted to kill him. Beneath the coolness and precise speech there was a fire that burned as hot as any of the classic hates of chivalry. This was not so much a modern man as a native of the past on whom modernity had been impasted. Perhaps, she thought, in a swift mental detour, that was what had attracted Charlotte.

"Well, doctor," she said quietly, pale and angry herself, "as you're very well aware, there is nothing I can do." He bowed sharply in reply. "Is there no way I can convince you—"

"Miss Shafer," he said, confidently incisive, "forgive that

I interrupt. This interview has been brief. It need not be longer. I have noticed that you have a taxi waiting. You will get back to town quite easily. I wish you a pleasant trip to Mexico City."

If there had been any slightest cranny of argument, she would have hidden in it and stayed; but as it was, there was no point in giving him a moment's more gloating than necessary. She felt almost as if it were a disservice to Seastrom to remain and let this man enjoy his victory. She picked up her bag, and he followed her to the garden door.

As he held it open for her, he said, "Perhaps, Miss Shafer, I ought to add that any other representatives of your company will also be wasting their time."

She looked at him, angry and pleased that she was able to be angry again. It was a rediscovered emotional muscle, and she was paradoxically grateful to him. Even the news about Van Nuys, she remembered, had not been able to make her really angry. "Good day, doctor," she said; and to puzzle him, "Thank you very much."

She got back to the hotel much sooner than she had expected, easily in time to make her train. While she was packing her few things, a telegram arrived for her. She hoped, as she took it, that Roy wasn't coming to Hidalgo; she didn't want to wait here. He wasn't; he had telegraphed her, with unconscious irony: "Am delayed. Good hunting. Let me hear."

She was ready almost half an hour before she had to leave, so she sat on the balcony to have a cigarette; there, for the first time since leaving the doctor, she allowed herself to think. I know what I'll do, she reflected, staring at the dome of the cathedral, I'll persuade myself that it didn't matter. I'll convince myself that there was nothing really to be gained by finding this man even if he has reclaimed himself, that there's nothing I could learn from him, perhaps even nothing he could tell. I'll believe that I was only

temporizing, that I seized on this insane quest as a time-filler, to give me something to fool myself with, instead of going back to face things in New Gilead, instead of facing myself. I'll believe that, badly off as I am, I'm better off without this jack-o'-lantern nonsense; that in spite of myself, I've been purged of a folly.

And that was all very well; she felt chillily brave with this sour-grapes relief until she thought of what lay ahead. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The bridge had been removed—whether it led to Cloud-Cuckooland or not, at least it had been there—and now all that was left was yawning emptiness, misty and unfathomable. She sat taut in her chair, almost afraid to move, lest she should topple over the brink. She could see herself falling, lazily as people always seem to do, with shreds of mist wisping past her, tumbling on and on without even the fatal satisfaction of finally crashing, falling endlessly . . .

The telephone rang.

It couldn't have rung.

It rang again. Then she remembered that Charlotte had promised to call and the quick spurt of fantastic hope plunged again. She summoned herself to the phone, to be a social person, to chat.

"Hello."

"Eleanor?" It was Charlotte, right enough.

"Yes. Yes, Charlotte."

"Thank Heaven." A deep sigh. "I was afraid you might have—Listen, are you planning to catch the eleven-thirty?"

"Yes, I was just getting ready to leave."

"Well, don't. Not till I get there anyway. I'm on the outskirts of town and I'll be there in a jiff. Won't waste time talking now. Flaps a-flying. 'Bye now."

She knew it was something good. She knew so positively that it was something good that she wasn't at all excited or nervous or even very happy. She spent the few minutes until

Charlotte appeared in carefully going over the rational poultices she had just applied to herself, discarding each of them in turn as false, the way one tears up memoranda one no longer needs.

Charlotte walked in with a sealed envelope in her hand. "Listen, this is for you, Eleanor. Where's your bag? We've just got time to make the train."

"But—what is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. At least, I have an idea, but I haven't seen it. Tell you about it on the way down in the elevator."

Isaac had telephoned their house early that morning (she said) to ask her to come over at once. As luck would have it, Paddy had answered the phone, had become suspicious, had asked questions, and Isaac had reported that Raquel had spent a bad night. So Paddy had gone over with her to see his sister. The two women hadn't had a chance to speak together until the very moment that Eleanor called and Paddy had gone down to see her.

While he was downstairs, Raquel had told her that it wasn't her illness that was clawing at her, it was the way she had treated her visitor the night before.

"She said that even the sedatives couldn't make her sleep. Because, to use her own phrase, she'd recognized you for what you are, and she began to feel more and more strongly that she'd been wrong; that she'd hurt Victor, rather than otherwise, by refusing to help you. She'd been lying awake there all night, poor dear, and she'd finally made up her mind. She decided that if Victor had given up the life he could have had in Hidalgo to do what mattered to him, she might follow his example, in a way, and give up something of what was precious to her—to help someone who evidently understood him. You'd have been surprised, Eleanor, how matter-of-factly she said all this. Not at all like last night. Though she looks a wreck. . . . Then she handed me this envelope and told me to get it to you.

And then Paddy came back upstairs—steaming, incidentally. And I made up some excuse—I still haven't the faintest notion what it was—and scuttled along here."

Eleanor looked at the envelope, then looked at Charlotte, then opened it and read the contents in the dim light of the elevator. The message was brief. It said, misspelling and all:

The Rickard Sanitarium
Tucson, Arrizona

"Is it what you wanted?" Charlotte's blue eyes bore down on her eagerly.

Eleanor shivered. "Tell—please tell Señora Sandoval—" She shrugged helplessly. "I don't know what to tell her."

"Never mind." Charlotte patted her arm. "Just for Heaven's sake don't let me know what it says. I love my husband and, well, I wouldn't want the responsibility."

The lobby was singing, thought Eleanor. As she stepped out of the elevator, resounding song rolled back off the walls and eddied around her. "Charlotte," she said, calm, knowing the source of the music, "I must just take a minute. I must send a wire, two wires. Only a minute."

"Sure thing," nodded Charlotte, "but hurry."

At the telegraph desk she scribbled a brief message to Roy telling him that she was on her way back with news. Then she sent a wire to the director of the Rickard Sanitarium, Tucson, Arizona, asking him whether a man named Victor West was on the staff and if not, whether he knew West's whereabouts. She thought it only fair to sign Roy's name, and she gave the Hotel Londres as the address.

Charlotte drove her to the station cleverly and quickly, got her a ticket, and took her to the coach. The train was about to leave. At the door, breathless, Eleanor turned and

said, "Charlotte, I—I'm glad there isn't much time. I—I couldn't—" She hesitated, and Charlotte helped her by extending her arms first. They embraced; then Eleanor hurried aboard.

"Vamonos!" called the conductor. The engine whistle underlined his cry.

At the window Eleanor said, "If it's any comfort to you, I'll never forget you."

"It's a great comfort," answered the homely woman with the curving, clowny smile. "Write to me once in a while, will you? It'll be a real treat down here in the jungle to get letters from a rising young—*Oh!*" Her hand went to her brow. As the train started to move, she dug into her voluminous handbag and brought out a slender book. "I wanted you to autograph it. Darn!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*E*leanor was glad that there was no voluble native traveler sitting next to her this time, no matter how well intentioned; she didn't want to be involved in even a one-sided conversation. Her mind was busy enough, so busy that it was with an occasional start of recognition that she saw how far they had come in what seemed a few minutes. This was the station where the singer accompanied himself on the harp; this one had the same barefoot child in the doorway with her baby brother on her hip; and there, in the middle of vast desert wastes, was the lone ragged man waving to show that he didn't mind the train's intrusion, men had to live.

The sight of the ragged old Indian turned her remembrance back. . . .

. . . Come on, you poor beat-up old bastard. One more spoonful, just to spite the graveyard . . .

She thought of Tucson and how near the conclusion might be. By this time tomorrow perhaps . . . Her mind furrowed so tightly in excitement and anticipation that her head soon began to ache. She had aspirin in her bag and she

bought a Coca-Cola to wash it down. Then she dozed a little, half aware of starts and stops and waits on sidetracks for northbound trains to pass on the main line. And at last they crossed the freight yard into the capital.

She was a little surprised that Roy wasn't at the station to meet her, but she supposed that he must have been delayed by some further development with the Tourist Department. Nevertheless, she phoned his room as soon as she got to the hotel. He was in.

"I apologize for not meeting you at the station," he said. "There was a reason."

She felt happy enough to make a joke; memory supplied her with the substance. "Well, I hope the reason has a last name, at least."

He chuckled. "Witticisms, eh? You *must* have good news. Come upstairs and spill it."

"I shall."

"Oh," he added, "you'd better be prepared for—a surprise."

"What do you mean?"

"Well—you'll see."

She sent the bellboy to her room with her bag and went directly to Roy's room. He called "yep" in response to her knock, instead of opening the door, and she went in. He was lying on the bed in a dressing gown. His right foot was wrapped in bandages and there was an adhesive plaster on his forehead.

"Don't faint." He grinned at her sudden pallor. "I'm all right. Mother and sprain are doing well. But you'll have to pardon my not rising. Come over and sit down." And, as she did so, he said, "You look beautiful. I'd forgotten how small you are. You look beautiful."

"What happened to you, Roy?" she managed to ask.

"Well, it wasn't the third degree by the commissar of

the Tourist Department. And no one hit me with a coke bottle again, if that's what you're thinking."

"Well, what was it?"

"I fell. Fell, that is, in quotation marks. Down a flight of stairs in a movie house. Imagine. In the movie business for two years and I get so flustered on my own home grounds that I fall down a flight of stairs."

"What? What *is* all this? What happened?" she asked, although she thought she could guess.

"I'm telling you. I fell. In a theater over on Avenida Bucareli, last night about ten-thirty. Pretty quick work, too. I only left the Tourist Department at three forty-five in the afternoon."

"You mean there's a connection between the two things?"

"Is there not!"

"Roy, *please*. Would you mind telling me from the beginning? What happened at the Tourist Department?"

"Oh, I got there at three yesterday, and our chum Ortiz Lopez took me in to see his chief. And I answered all the old boy's questions. But when he was finished, I told him that if he wasn't satisfied, if he wanted to hold me for further questioning, I'd insist on calling the Embassy. That settled it. They thanked me for helping them clear up the matter; seemed I hadn't violated any law at all."

"Did he mention who had reported you?"

"I asked chiefie but he clammed up. Then I asked him what he was going to do about—his informants. The old boy shrugged and said he'd simply notify them that they'd been mistaken, I couldn't be legally detained or hindered. And I said he could also notify them that I intended to proceed with my business at once.

"That, as I say, was about three forty-five. And last night about ten-thirty I was coming down the stairs of this

movie theater when these two fellows rushed by. Pretty fast work, eh? Less than ten hours."

In Hidalgia she had forgotten all about Lucas and Tennant. She had confined the matter to herself and Seastrom alone; now reality elbowed its way back in.

Roy continued: "You know those dreams where you lose your footing and fall down a long flight of stairs? Well, this was it. I thought, 'Now I'm going to know what it's really like,' and as a matter of fact, it wasn't bad. I didn't even have sense enough to be scared until I saw the floor coming up at me."

"Roy," she said anxiously, her hand on his arm, "are you all right? I mean—that's stupid, here you lie all bandaged up and I ask that. I mean—"

He laughed a little. "I'm O.K. Great fight. Never laid a glove on me. Scratched my scalp a bit and I had to have my ankle strapped, but it's more annoying than painful. The doctor says I have to stay off my feet for at least three days. And look what I just got."

He showed her a telegram. It was from a man at the studio named Seymour Nisber, and it urged Roy to make all speed. The studio had just learned secretly that Ajax-International was preparing an aviation cavalcade very much like the one Peerless was planning. Ajax, Nisber was informed, had already signed three famous aviators. Did Roy think he would have any word in a couple of days? As soon as they signed Seastrom, Peerless could release the news and beat Ajax to the punch.

"You see," said Roy, "whichever studio announces its picture first and gets rolling first will skim most of the cream and all of the so-called glory. And here I am, horsed de combat. Well," he sighed, "at least, you've been busy. What did—"

"Roy," she interrupted, "did you tell the police what happened to you?"

He shrugged. "What could I tell them? I wouldn't recognize the fellows who pushed me if they walked in and confessed. Besides, they're just a couple of hired hands."

"Lucas wasn't fooling."

"I never thought he was." He laughed. "Boy, I've got a nerve. What makes me think I can afford a heroic streak? The irony of it is, as Tod pointed out himself, he may get me fired by the very company I'm doing this for."

"Do you think he can do it?"

"Oh, nothing surprises me any more. Particularly about far-reaching pull. Well, if he does, then I'll have to go to New York. Anyway, let's get to the point. Hidalgo." He looked at her expectantly.

She had a fleeting image of herself as a retriever with a fat duck in her mouth, bringing it back and laying it at his feet; and she smiled. He assumed that the smile was connected with her good news and was mildly surprised at her first words. "Seastrom's not there, Roy. But I found out where he went. He left almost three years ago to work in a sanitarium in Tucson, Arizona. As Victor West. I've already wired the Tucson place for information. I signed your name to the wire and gave this address."

He lifted her hand and kissed it. "'Deine Treu' erhielt mein Leben' . . . which was Beethoven's way of saying 'Thanks.'"

"Oh, Roy," she shook her head, "please don't be grateful to me. It's all the other way round."

He peered at her a moment before he said, "You want to tell me how you found out about things? Who you saw? Want to tell me?"

"Don't be silly," she replied with a frown, "of course I want to tell you. All about it. Well," she added, "almost all about it."

She told him about the doctor and his wife and Señora Sandoval. She omitted only two matters: her poetry and the

real reason for Sandoval's change. For the first, she felt that mentioning the poetry (since Roy knew nothing about it) would shift the emphasis to herself. For the second matter, there was no way of telling it without telling a good deal else; so, as far as Roy knew, she had never stepped out of the role of business representative and Señora Sandoval had changed her mind in order that Peerless might find Seastrom.

But even with those two alterations, the story left Roy quiet and glowering. "My God, what we've stumbled into." Then he smiled. "It's funny."

"How?"

"Oh, it's kind of typical of our world. Here we are, all because of Hollywood and their mythology and the money-making out of that mythology—all because of that, we start looking into another myth and we find out that it's true. With a truth that would scare the pants off the Mr. Nisbers on the Coast. What have they to do, they and their celluloid, with this guy Seastrom?"

"Well, they only want the untrue part of his life. Or the less true part."

"That, I suppose, is some consolation . . . if that's the word I'm looking for."

"Perhaps. Anyway, I know what you mean."

He looked at her soberly. "Yeah, I suppose you do. That's the kind of girl you are, always going around knowing what I mean. Some of the time better than I know it myself." He wagged a finger at her severely. "But don't forget this. I want to find Seastrom just as much as you do. And I've got private reasons too, just as well as you. So there."

"Roy," she said tentatively, "I don't think I want to joke about it yet."

He acceded with an apologetic nod. "O.K., Eleanor. But I really do want to find out what happens to men like

him. Because personally I think the time is out of joint for heroes."

"There," said Eleanor, "*that's* what I'd call consolation. If I were in a position to call anything anything."

They had lunch together in Roy's room. He sat on the edge of his bed, facing her across a service table, and there was a cozy reunited feeling between them even though they had been apart only twenty-four hours. "It's nice to eat with you again," he said. "I like to eat with the people I like. Particularly 'ordered' food—from a menu, I mean. I love the feeling of 'First you order and then I order and then they'll bring it and we'll have it together.' That probably makes no sense," he acknowledged, spearing a carrot.

"Perfect sense," she insisted. "I remember when I was little and my father used to take me out—to the Shoreham, for instance, in Washington. I used to think when I walked in that there were all those wonderful tastes and smells waiting for us, rows and rows of them, and all we had to do was speak and we could have whatever we wanted, together. Sometimes now, when I go into a really good restaurant, if I'm very hungry, I almost cry: thinking of my father."

He nodded at her as he chewed; and after he'd swallowed, he said, "You know, that's the first you've ever voluntarily mentioned anything to me about yourself, and your family, and things. You're a good deal different from the girl I met last week, Eleanor."

"No, I'm not," she answered immediately, almost defensively.

"Orl raht, daoon't get 'uffy," he replied in atrocious cockney, "Hi ownly meant hit ez a compliment. You 'evn't chinjed then, hif you prefer," he said, wondering why she objected to admitting it since she must know it was so.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bark."

"Too late to apologize now. My seconds will see you in the morning."

She smiled and said, "It's only that it isn't true." Sometime, she realized, she would have to abandon these pointless denials. After all, this had nothing to do with Ralph, it wasn't a disavowal of anything about him, her love for him or her guilt for him, to recognize that the calendar couldn't be nailed down.

"Sure," he replied breezily and made a joking remark to the waiter who had just come in. She allowed herself to smile at the joke, now that it was agreed that she hadn't changed.

When they had almost finished lunch, a bellboy brought up a telegram for Roy. He read it swiftly and without comment handed it to her. It was from Tucson, from Dr. Irving Rickard. The message read: "Victor West left here four days ago. No knowledge of whereabouts. Sorry."

I don't care, she thought immediately, I don't care what the telegram says, it isn't finished. Let Roy say all the discouraged, pessimistic, final things he likes—I know it isn't over. Everything that's grown in the past few days, all the warmth that's sifted down into the coldest corners, all that doesn't get swept away by one small yellow slip of paper. Things that are beginning to come together after so long don't unmesh by the space of four days.

. . . Facts, facts, she cautioned herself. No more "balcony" talk.

Damn facts. What had facts ever done for her? This telegram was a fact, and what good was it to her? She would choose her facts, and if that was romanticism, then she was a romantic. At least it wasn't a cowardly romanticism; it was harder to persist in the face of this news than to accept it.

Roy's first remark was in the vein she had anticipated. "Well," he said slowly and dourly, "that is that. Kaput."

But the curious thing about Roy was that secretly he was not entirely dismayed. At the instant of reading the telegram he had felt a queer flicker of pleasure, as if he had been relieved of a burden—a burden he wouldn't have jettisoned himself but which he wasn't sorry, evidently, to have lifted off him. Curious. He wondered why his reflex barometer had swung so instantaneously to pleasure. He didn't think it was merely that he wouldn't have to run any more risks with Lucas-Tennant. It was probably a deeper relief—at not having to be so continually close to this uncomfortable story, this disquieting man.

However, he had to appear disappointed, as indeed he was in part. "Wrapped up with a big pink bow," he said glumly.

"Do you mean—you think that's all? That's the end?"

He shrugged. "Read it and weep. What else is to do? I'd better phone the studio right away that I've run up a blind alley. H'mph. Damned bad luck. Four days. All the time we've been looking for him, he's been sitting there. And now that we find the place . . ."

"Roy, what will the studio do?"

"Oh, I'll write them a complete report, and they'll hire investigators, experts at this kind of thing. They've used them before."

"Professional investigators?"

He had to smile. Her tone made it clear that, to her, professionalism and this matter stood in roughly the same relation as the bordello and the marriage chamber. "Yes, dear, professionals. And they'll probably accomplish in a few days what we'd flub around at for weeks." She was silent. "I'm sorry," he said. "What else can I do?"

She hardly hesitated. "You could let me go to Tucson. Tomorrow."

Roy's eyebrows arched as he smiled. "This I might have expected. I really might have."

She leaned forward eagerly. "Roy, there must be *something*. Some clue. He couldn't have just disappeared completely. There must be something. This doctor doesn't know how anxious we are to find him. Maybe if I went there—"

He shook his head kindly. "Absolutely no reason to think so, Eleanor. What's the use of kidding ourselves? We've missed him. The doctor would have told us where to find him if he knew."

"Well, perhaps he doesn't know, but there might be someone else there who does. There might easily have been something—some word—some hint . . . I can't believe it simply ends with this wire. Just four days too late."

"We sure were close. We almost had him. But he's moved on. Maybe Lucas moved him on."

"Maybe." She doubted it. "Though from what I heard in Hidalgo, I think Seastrom's running his own life now. The point is, I don't see what harm there is in my going up to Tucson to see."

He toyed with his coffee spoon. "Maybe if I could go with you. But I can't. And I don't want you running any risks. The boys are getting a little active," he said with a glance at his foot.

"Yes, I know, Roy, and that's considerate of you. But I want to go."

"Eleanor, listen. I understand how interested you are, but this is just plain silly. The matter's out of our hands."

"Please, Roy."

"No, I'm sorry, Eleanor. There was some point in your going to Hidalgo, risky as it was. There's absolutely no point in this. I'm sorry."

She got up angrily and walked to the window. She was almost as angry as she had been with Dr. Padilla and she was enjoying it similarly. And in the enjoyment of her

lately reclaimed power of anger, she forgot that a few minutes before she had denied that she had changed at all.

Suddenly she turned and faced him. "I just thought of something, Roy," she said quietly. "I don't need your permission. I can go anyway, if I like."

He grinned. "I never thought of that either. Of course you can—if you like."

"Roy, I'm going. I have to."

She waited a moment, so as not to be abrupt, to give him a chance to speak if he chose; but he didn't say anything. He just sighed and ran his hand over his close-cropped head and shrugged.

"I'm going downstairs now," said Eleanor, "to arrange it."

At the travel desk in the lobby she learned that there was a plane leaving the next morning for Tucson. There were a few vacant seats; she booked one.

When she returned to Roy's room, the patches of tension in the air had entirely evaporated. He was lying, calm, with one arm under his head, lighting a cigarette. With a feeling of "this-has-happened-before" she remembered the morning she had waked in that easy chair and he had been lying there, smoking and looking at her. How remote that morning seemed, far down a conical Daliesque corridor of memory; how much had happened since to widen that corridor, to change the light in which she stood.

He glanced up. "Set?"

"All set. Leaving at nine tomorrow. I'll be in Tucson tomorrow afternoon."

He nodded. "Then," he said reflectively, "I'm willing to take a long chance. I'll hold off twenty-four hours before I report to the studio. You can have it all to yourself till then."

Her smile flowed down through her until it reached her knees and she had to sit. "Thank you, Roy."

"Well," he replied dubiously, "O.K. But, Eleanor, if

nothing turns up by then I'll have to tell the Coast I'm stuck and let them handle it from there on. I'm taking a long chance as it is. There's an awful lot of money tied up in this and, gosh, the whole picture was my idea originally. I have a considerable obligation the other way."

"I understand," she said soberly, "of course. If there's nothing in Tucson, I'll give up. I'll have to give up."

"You found out about that sanitarium, so I figured you deserved first crack. I just hope no one decides to shove you down a flight of stairs." He put up a stern finger. "Be sure to stay out of the movies in Tucson." She seized his warning hand, feeling happy and grateful. "The real reason, I guess," he said, "is that I flatter myself I know how you feel about this little project."

"Well, you must feel something like that yourself. Or you wouldn't understand how I feel."

"Maybe. I could use an example of—shall we say?—'stamina' as well as the next guy, I guess. Real stamina—not just schoolboy defiance of stairway pushers. 'If you push me, I'll push you back.' Almost anybody can stand up to tangibles for a time; it's not really much of a trick. But those other things—that no one else can see and no one can cheer you for but yourself, and you wonder whether you're being a damned fool for even—" He broke off. "Want to hear a confession, queen? When I read that telegram just now, I felt relieved."

She nodded and didn't say anything for fear of sounding patronizing. Then in a moment she began to talk about Hidalgo, how beautiful the city was and the plain around it.

Later, as she picked up her things to leave, she said casually, "Incidentally, Roy, about that job that was offered you in New York. Have you made up your mind?"

He chuckled. "Dear, don't ever try to be a secret agent;

you'll get shot the first day." The chuckle faded. "No decision yet. Paralysis of the decider lobe, I guess."

He squinted at her. "I wouldn't be surprised if you were just as yellow as I am, actually. But I wish I had your appetite for progress."

Teodoro came up that night for three-handed poker and, as usual, won. Roy had left word at the travel desk for him to call when he came back from his trip, feeling sure that he would want to see Eleanor before she left. First, at the guide's request, Roy told him that Eleanor had learned that their man had gone to Tuscon, and then told him that Eleanor was leaving for Tucson next day.

Teodoro looked at her. "You coming back again here, you think, señorita?"

"I don't know, Teodoro. Perhaps not. Probably not."

He scowled. "What time your plane goes?"

"Nine. In the morning."

"Well," he said, "you don't take no taxi. I come and drive you to the airport. Free."

It was the supreme tribute.

He left about ten, and she and Roy played gin rummy for a while, not because either of them particularly wanted to play but because they wanted to sit together a bit longer and neither of them felt much like conversation. In the middle of the game, Roy said, "Incidentally, you'll let me know right away whether you find anything up there, won't you? Wire or phone. If there *is* anything, I could meet you in Tucson—or wherever—in a couple of days. I'll be able to get around by then."

"Oh, I'd let you know at once, Roy. Of course."

He made gin, put his cards down, and leaned back against his pillow, studying her. "Good. That's good. Of course, if you find Seastrom, that'd be wonderful too. But the really important thing is to get in touch with me, es-

pecially if you go off somewhere tracking him. So that I can get to see you again."

Teodoro was waiting when she came downstairs at eight; she had to be at the field a half hour ahead of time to go through the customs.

"Good morning, Teodoro," she said. "Thanks for being so prompt."

"That's nothing," he replied carelessly. "Well, you ready to go? You said good-bye to Señor Roy?"

"Yes. I just stopped in his room. I think he was awake enough to remember that I came in to see him. Anyway, you remind him later, will you, Teodoro? And sort of keep an eye on him until he can get about."

"Oh, sure. You don't need to worry. You had breakfast?"

"I'll have it on the plane. All I have to do now is check out."

When she did so, the clerk wished her a pleasant trip, then said, as he returned the key to the box, "Oh, señorita, lucky I looked. A letter for you."

It was from Aunt Julia. She thanked the clerk, put the letter in her pocketbook, and said good-bye.

During the ride to the airport Teodoro was so quiet and scowled so continuously that she knew he was upset. She liked him for it, but to help put him at ease she asked him questions as they drove through the drizzly streets. (The first rainy morning I've seen in Mexico, she thought, the day I leave.)

"Is this the part of town you live in, Teodoro?"

"Not far," he said. "Maybe ten blocks that way."

"I wish we had time to drop in." She glanced at the small smiling photograph he kept above the windshield. "I'd like to meet your wife."

He grunted. "Not such a good idea, maybe. Tina, she's

very jealous. When she ask me about this girl I been driving around with lately, I said you was old and fat."

She smiled. "Why, you're not afraid of her, are you? You've told us so much about how you're the master in your house, not like American husbands."

"Oh," he shrugged, "she makes any trouble, I'm gonna sock her. But that don't stop her from being jealous. You see," he grinned, "Mexican wives, they're like that. She's gonna think I don't believe she loves me, if she don't get jealous. Even though she knows I'm gonna hit her for makin' trouble.

"Just like," he said, "if I see her talkin' to another man, or going downtown without her mother, she's gonna be disappointed if I don't hit her. She's gonna think I don't love her any more."

"Well," said Eleanor, surrendering, "as long as you're both happy."

At the airport Teodoro shooed the porters away angrily and himself carried her luggage to the desk. He saw her checked in and passed through the customs; and then it was time for her to board the plane. They heard the announcement over the loudspeaker.

"There," said Teodoro.

"Yes," she said, and held out her hand. "I thank you for everything, Teodoro. Good-bye."

He took her hand. "Good-bye, señorita." His long face was extremely grave and tense. "Come to see us again, ha?"

Stepping into the American plane was like stepping out of Mexico. The faces of the hostesses, the air conditioning, and above all, the plentiful evidence of the great American industry of antisepsis ("This Headrest Has Been Laundered For *You Alone*" . . . "These Drinking Cups Are Untouched by Human Hands")—all of these took her home before the plane started. She remembered something Teo-

doro had said once: "My kids won't eat anythin' any more if there's a speck of dirt on it. They're as bad as Americans."

The plane rolled lickingly over the wet concrete, then headed straight for the thick gray roof. The clouds shredded around them, like a stone wall in a dream, and within minutes, they were up into bright sunshine, feeling elect and superior to the earthbound sunless ones under the woolly floor.

There was one rift in the clouds and through it she caught a last glimpse of the glistening, sprawled city. There, she thought, down there—the city of my life. Down there, the corner of Gabriel Leyva and Calle de los Zapateros and the vaudeville theater and the hotel where I met Roy, who put me on this road . . . She remembered the letter from her aunt. She unfastened the safety belt and took it out.

Aunt Julia was evidently deeply upset. She had thought that by this time Eleanor would feel much better, physically and mentally. She certainly didn't want to intrude but was there anything she could do? Eleanor wasn't to hesitate to ask, even if it meant coming to Mexico or anywhere else. . . . Meanwhile, she was going to take one liberty. She wasn't going to tell the Andrews School that Eleanor wouldn't report for her new job. She wanted Eleanor to think it over further; there would still be plenty of time to give the school notice.

One last paragraph—a repetition. Anything that Eleanor wanted. Anything.

And all, thought Eleanor, without ever once asking what the trouble is, what's wrong. *Why* won't you come home? Oh, my darling aunt.

A curious thing about the letter was that it was a complete reflection of the mood in which Eleanor had written to her, and though that letter had been sent only a few days past, its mood already seemed in some respects anachronistic. At least that mood wasn't so strong any longer

("I *have* changed; this silly pretending might as well stop"). It was important, for her aunt's sake, that she be brought up to date, so to speak.

There was stationery in the pocket on the back of the seat ahead ("Hy-jene Pak—Sealed For Your Safety"). She wrote a brief note, telling her aunt that she was feeling considerably improved and that it probably was wiser not to have said anything to the school. She wasn't quite as sure now that she wouldn't be able to take the job, although she was far from having made a decision the other way. But she had found something that might help to clarify her mind and she was devoting her time to it; she didn't know yet how it would turn out. She was sorry to be mysterious—someday, perhaps, they'd sit down and talk about it. (We'll either be able to talk about it, thought Eleanor, or I won't be back.) Meanwhile, with all gratitude and love, there was nothing Aunt Julia could do now except continue to *be* there. . . . Aunt Julia would notice that this letter was post-marked in Arizona. She was traveling about a bit, might travel even farther.

. . . She wondered how she could explain to Aunt Julia, if she ever had to, why she was doing this; flying a thousand miles after a man who had already left so that she might follow him again; in the hope that . . . Well, why not? she thought stoutly. I must quit thinking that I may possibly be a damned fool. Even if there isn't a scrap of personal meaning in it for me, at least after coming this far I have the simple right to find out how the story ends. Leaving any question of identification out of it. Just as a human being, just from the point of view of interest.

As she wrote the address on the envelope, the words "New Gilead" seemed to take on an independent life, not combinations of letters but animate forms glowing on the paper. Within their light she saw the comfort of the castle, the fortress from which she had been excluded and exiled,

toward which she was tending, trying to tend. The horror back there was no longer articulated in detail when she thought of it; it had become an amorphous black mass that intervened between her and her home, which she would have to pierce and pass through to reach that home, to attain the safety that glowed in those two words. Her father's town.

If only he were here. . . . No, that was the kind of thought she wasn't going to vitiate herself with any more.

She remembered something he'd said to her once, after Jack's death: "Nelly, you ought to have gone off with that boy. You ought to have married him when he asked you. I'm glad now that you didn't; but at the time you ought to have gone. I think you wanted to go, but I think you told yourself I wouldn't approve, and you leaned on my disapproval to let you out of a bad time. As I say, I'm glad you didn't marry him, but in a way that's beside the point. I can't supply your will forever, Nelly. What'll you do when I'm not around any more?"

She had found out—at any rate, was finding out. The first and slowest thing was learning that her father had been right about her, something she hadn't quite believed at the time. Now, at last, she was trying to mend the lack. . . .

She thought now of going back there, of exposing to a white blasting glare the secretest things. She felt the same nausea, the same trickling nastiness. She heard the snickers and whispers, she felt herself being pushed forward, pointed at, naked, worse than naked. . . . But the surprising element—which had never occurred before often as she had thought of it—was that she could imagine herself actually *doing* it. Only in imagination, of course; still, even that had been impossible before. . . . The same utter, wrenching revulsion, the same horror; but this time, instead of the scene isolated and abstract, a clear projection of herself into the middle of it.

She remembered something Tolstoy had written apropos of a gigantic Napoleonic battle: that the course of history is decided not by commanders' plans and brilliant strategy but by the simple soldier; that everything depends on whether at the crucial, flaming moment the ordinary soldier cries, "We are lost," and runs; or whether he stays. Well, up to now, she had never been able to conceive of herself as being in the battle at all; it was something of a change even to be able to think of turning in the midst of it and running.

My God, she smiled incredulously, tremblingly, suppose I *was* able to do this thing. I never could. But *suppose* it. . . .

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She checked her bags at the Tucson airport and took a taxi directly to the Rickard Sanitarium. It was just outside of town, a low, relaxed-looking building at the end of a palm-lined drive. Once again Eleanor was able to speak easily to taxi drivers and ask questions; it was comfortable, but it was an oddly letdown feeling, as if formerly commonplace matters, temporarily intriguing, had become commonplace again.

The sanitarium corridors were professionally cool after the afternoon Arizona sun. At the end of the coolest one she came to an oak door neatly lettered "Dr. Rickard." A female voice, evidently used to addressing paying patients, lilted "Come in" in answer to her knock.

Dr. Rickard's secretary was so attractive that she made Eleanor feel ill at ease. It was ostentatious; there was no medical reason why a doctor's secretary needed to be so pretty. She had tan hair and a bee-stung lower lip whose lipstick had been carefully applied with a brush.

"Excuse me. I wondered whether I might see Dr. Rick-

ard for a moment," Eleanor asked as if she had dropped in from across the street.

"The doctor isn't in just now, I'm afraid." The vocal effect was as if an atomizer had been pointed at you and you were being efficiently and soothingly sprayed. The secretary glanced at her pad. "You didn't have an appointment, did you?" You naughty, naughty girl.

"No, I came in on the chance that I'd find him free."

"Oh, what a shame. He's at a meeting downtown. Is it urgent? An emergency?"

"No, nothing like that. I merely wanted to ask for some information."

"Oh. Well, perhaps it's something I could help you with." Come to this compassionate, sharply uplifted bosom.

"It's about a man who used to work here. He left only four—no, five days ago. Victor West."

The secretary made her first natural move. Her eyebrows lifted in genuine surprise. "That's odd. We had a wire about him yesterday."

"Yes, I know. I—it's in connection with that wire that I came."

"All the way from Mexico City?"

"Yes. It's important."

"Oh." She wanted to know why, obviously, but had no grounds for asking. "Well, as you know, miss, we wired you that we had no knowledge of West's whereabouts. He left no forwarding address."

"Yes, I understand. But I—we thought that there might be something—someone here perhaps whom he spoke to—"

"Not at this end of the building, I'm afraid." This time the eyebrows went up in a practised gesture of "happy thought." "I'll tell you what, though. Why don't you see Miss Fogarty, in Room 158? She's our staff supervisor and she might just possibly be able to help you. Although she's

the one who told us she knew nothing of his whereabouts. But if anyone can help you, she can."

"Well, I think I'll try. As long as I've come this distance."

A mirror-made smile. "All rightie. Surely. Go right ahead."

"Room 158? Miss Fogarty?"

"Right you are." The smile to be held until the door closed.

"Thank you very much," said Eleanor, closing the door slowly to put the smile really on its mettle.

Miss Fogarty was pink-cheeked and corseted, a woman of only about thirty but with the maternal figure of fifty-five.

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Shafer," she said with the cheerfulness of one so accustomed to authority that she could allow it to lie half concealed. "But I don't know that there's anything I can tell you."

"I know he left no forwarding address, Miss Fogarty, but I thought perhaps he might have mentioned something to someone." She heard herself bring out that phrase again like a password, hoping it would get her over the border out of ignorance. "Perhaps he mentioned something to one of the other orderlies or nurses."

"I don't believe it, Miss Shafer," the stout woman replied kindly. "I asked yesterday when the wire came."

Eleanor nodded, as if all this were happening in a dream coming true. She had half expected that this was what she would hear, but hope and experience had immunized her and these answers didn't really discourage her. She kept on, plucked at the next question like a man going hand over hand along a rope over an abyss, obstinately putting one hand before the other so he won't have time to look below and be frightened.

"Well—did he say why he was leaving, Miss Fogarty? Did he give any reason? Did you expect it?"

"Not a bit. He just walked in here five days ago and informed me he was leaving, effective immediately. No reason stated. I told him that, besides the fact that we hated to lose a good man, it was unusual for an employee to go without giving a week's notice. He said he knew it and he was sorry and he understood he'd forfeit a week's pay, but it was time to move on."

"To move on. And he didn't say where."

"He didn't, Miss Shafer. And I didn't ask where. Because—well, it was none of my business if he didn't want to say; and West was the kind of man who wouldn't want to say. I asked him only whether it was another job he had and he said it was, in a way. So I wished him good luck and said I hoped we'd be hearing from him, and if he ever needed a reference it'd be my pleasure."

"And that was all?"

"That was all. And an hour or two later he was gone. Put us to a bit of trouble, replacing him quick like that. But I couldn't hold a grudge against him, he'd done so fine while he was here."

"And that's all," repeated Eleanor.

"Yes, miss. All I can suggest now is that you advertise in the papers. The only other thing—well, perhaps you wouldn't care to do it," she said tentatively.

"What's that, Miss Fogarty?"

"The police. Missing Persons Bureau. I've a brother on the force."

Eleanor heard the suggestion in a distant, furry way, but it was enough to prod her on, to make her ask more questions, to refuse to stop because to stop would be to see where she was. "Miss Fogarty, did he behave at all differently the day he left? Did his behavior seem unusual in any respect?"

"No, miss, I wouldn't say so. At least I wouldn't say it was different. Just more of the same, sort of. Like—well, as

if he sort of knew a private joke but even so he wasn't laughing at it very hard." She shook her head. "Queer man, that. But an awful good orderly." She clasped her plump hands on her desk. "Miss Shafer, I can see you're real anxious to find him, dear, and I wish I could help you but that's all there is. Now you're certainly welcome to go talk to anyone here you like—nurses or orderlies or anyone at all you think might help you, but I don't even know who to suggest."

"You're very kind, Miss Fogarty. Thank you. Maybe I—I had better talk to some of them. Whereabouts did he work?"

"On the third floor. Miss Resseguie is the chief nurse up there, though I don't think she can tell you anything. I've asked her. She says he was just sitting by her desk that day for a few minutes—she took note of it because you didn't often see him sitting down—and he was reading the paper. She says when he sat down everything was as fine as could be. And when he got up, he asked to be excused a few minutes so he could come down and see me. It was as sudden as that."

As sudden as that. Sat down to read the paper . . .

"What day was this, Miss Fogarty? Five days ago?"

"Yes, miss, that's right."

Any straw now. "Miss Fogarty, this may sound silly—but do you know what paper he was reading?"

"Well, I don't know for sure, but it was Miss Resseguie's paper, I guess, and she takes the *Bee-Dispatch*."

"Do you think—would there be a copy—"

Miss Fogarty nodded. "They keep them usually for a week in the library. Why don't we have a look?"

Miss Fogarty rose from her white-enameled desk and led her down a corridor. "It's very good of you to take all this trouble," said Eleanor.

Miss Fogarty looked at her. Something in her fat face

seemed to say she understood—although the thanks were conventional—that there were real feelings, inexpressible, for which that pat sentence was the only negotiable currency. “No trouble at all,” smiled Miss Fogarty.

In the library Miss Fogarty found the huge folder of the *Bee-Dispatch*; the issue they wanted was included. She opened the folder and slid it around on the linoleum-topped table. “There you are.”

Eleanor almost didn’t want to look. Because if there was nothing here, there was nothing anywhere. She would have to telegraph Roy that she was finished and throw the doors open to everything in herself that she had so far managed to crowd back inch by painful inch.

Miss Fogarty was watching closely, meaning well but still not moving her eyes.

Eleanor scanned the first page. Nothing at all that she could relate to Seastrom-West. Nothing on the second page.

On page three there was a box two columns wide saying that Senator Seth Tennant had been stricken seriously ill while motoring through northern Pennsylvania. This sudden recurrence of an old illness was so grave that he had been removed to the nearest hospital, in Locklow, rather than to New York or Philadelphia. His personal physician had been sent for. There followed a brief résumé of Tennant’s recent actions in the Senate and his past record in politics and publishing, written in a tone which implied that if you needed to be told these things about this man you were beyond enlightenment anyway.

Eleanor read it slowly, memorizing the names. Decker Hospital. Locklow, Pennsylvania. Seventy-five miles north of Philadelphia. Calmly, she thought. Read it through. Now look through the whole paper.

She was thinking of what he had said to Miss Fogarty. It was time to move on.

She finished, and closed the big folder.

"Did you find anything helpful?" asked the supervisor. She shook her head. "Oh, I'm sorry," commiserated Miss Fogarty. "*I am* very sorry."

Eleanor said there was no point in wasting more of her time, and Miss Fogarty replied that she was welcome to as much time as she liked but she didn't know what else there was that she or anyone else could do. Eleanor, reassuming the regret she had just secretly dismissed, said she supposed so; she was convinced at last.

They walked to the front door together and Miss Fogarty sent the doorman down the drive to the main road for a taxi. The sky behind the palms was deepening through the whole range of desert orange and scarlet and red.

"If we should find out anything," said Miss Fogarty, "if West should write or someone should hear from him, is there anywhere we can get in touch with you, Miss Shafer?"

Eleanor considered. After all, the relevance of Tennant's illness to his departure was only her conjecture; he might not be there. But she couldn't leave her own address because she didn't know where she'd be. She tore a leaf from her address book and scribbled Roy's name and address.

"I'll be traveling," she said as she handed it to Miss Fogarty. "But if you got in touch with this man, I'd hear about it."

"I see." Miss Fogarty glanced at the address and was puzzled but was too used to being puzzled about people to burst forth with a question. "If anything comes up, we'll let him know right away."

"I'm very much obliged to you, Miss Fogarty."

"Not at all, I'm sure. Good luck to you, Miss Shafer." She smiled and shook hands firmly, with sympathy, the sympathy of those who, although their lives are stitched and fretted with jobs and memos and forty-cent lunches, see life as the chance crossings of perilous voyages on vast uncharted seas.

Eleanor told the taxi to take her to the airport. She learned there that a seat was available on an early morning plane which stopped at Philadelphia; from there she could get a train to Locklow. Then she wired Roy: "Am leaving for Locklow, Pennsylvania, tomorrow morning. Nothing definite but have reason to believe he went there five days ago. Tennant taken ill there at that time. Will know more tomorrow night and will wire you then. How are you?" She hesitated, then chided herself for hesitating and added: "Affectionately." Then she took her smaller bag out of the checkroom, bought two evening papers, and asked a cabbie to drive her to the nearest good hotel.

The quick desert night had flowed out over the earth. A glittering sky canopied the car, immense yet friendly. "The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit," Joyce had called it. Tonight, as the cool air rushed through the window, she thought she could smell the heavy perfume of the fruit and the cold fire of the tree.

She stared up, hoping that their diamond steadiness might help to provide her mind with compass points. . . . "It was time to move on" . . . Why? Why had Tennant's illness made him say that? *Had* he gone to see Tennant?

She had nothing more to guide her than an intuition, but she had never had more than intuitions or imaginings in this affair and she had succeeded in following at least this far. She had a talent, she thought, for understanding Seaström, for translating his actions into motives and resolves and future actions; as if she were the only archaeologist who could read certain hieroglyphs. It was her pride, her special ability. Perhaps no one else in the world could do it.

But it had its disadvantages too. For now it presented to her the possibility that he had gone to Locklow with some sort of revenge in mind. Was it conceivable that he wanted to harm Tennant? Ought she to wire ahead and

warn someone? Would it be on her conscience if she picked up the paper and read—

She shrugged impatiently. To whom could she wire and who could she tell them she was? And what could she possibly say in the message?

Besides, the man who had spent five years doing what Seastrom had done hadn't been preparing to commit violence. He had certainly been preparing for something—else why would he have insisted on leaving Hidalgia, why would he have told Miss Fogarty that the time had come to move on? But not violence. Anyway, if it was violence against Tennant that he'd had in mind, he could have done it fifteen years ago.

And what reason could he have for hating Tennant? Tennant had done him nothing but good—at least what the world and (probably) Tennant called good, no matter what Seastrom thought. Tennant, so far as she knew, had done nothing but keep people from bothering him in Mexico, had got him out of trouble in Patzcuaro, had secured him a job.

In her room she went through the evening papers. There was a brief story in each, in the second section, saying that Tennant was still in the Decker Hospital in Locklow too ill to be moved and that his condition was still serious. His physician, although not alarmed, had sent for consultants.

She went to bed impatient and happy, with not an atom of doubt in her that Seastrom had gone to Locklow. But in the morning she felt as if she had a hangover from a debauch of confidence. Nothing seemed right or reasonable and she appeared to herself to be an unreal, frivolous person moving in a serious day-to-day world. As the passenger steps were wheeled up to the side of the plane and she took a long look at the pointed and brutal motors, she wondered whether it was fair: to have let them invent planes and build airfields

and set up schedules, all so that she might pursue a fantasy, an *ignis fatuus* of hope. As they climbed into the east she felt almost as if she were perpetrating a fraud on the pilots and designers and engineers, all those years of experiment and work to provide a plane so that she might continue to snatch at straws. To pursue a man who might prove to be only a neurotic flagellant.

The plane roared along, too quickly. The sun and the perfect breakfast cheered her a little and then for some reason, a color, a shape of cloud—perhaps for no reason—she thought of Ralph, and that made her feel a little better too. At least she had done, was doing, *something*.

In Room 607 of the Hotel Londres, Roy said, "You're sure we're going to make it in time, Teodoro?"

"Absolute sure. Here's the plane ticket, señor. How's your foot?"

"Well—could be better. But I'll make out."

"You gotta leave right away? You coont rest another day?"

"No, I think I have to go."

Sigh. "O.K. I go down the gift shop downstairs. They got canes there. I get you one."

"Good idea. Thanks. There's money on the dresser."

"But I sure don't like to take you to the airport. First she leaves, then right away next day you. And you don't come back. I can tell."

There was just enough time in Philadelphia to have dinner—a cup of soup and a sandwich—before her train left for Locklow. It was a fast train; it would get her there in an hour and a half. Now, as the train rocked along, as the point of all these last days' doings and imaginings was to be revealed or not revealed, the last curtain to be sundered, she found pictures of the past flashing through her mind as if

her life were drawing to a close, pictures without order or apparent connection. Her one visual memory of her young, flowery mother; her father in his robes; her father sleeping under a tree; a farmer's boy who had pushed her into a brook one early summer and whom she had loved; Jack getting mad at the station; an earlier Jack on their first night together; a clear picture of herself (seen from God knows where) standing dry-eyed and stunned beside Jack's coffin; a certain blue corduroy hunting cap she had worn at college. . . .

She wondered why this potpourri of things past insisted on pressing forward into her consciousness at this particular moment. Maybe just because it *was* past; because she sensed or wished that tonight might be the beginning of something different, better or worse but different. She was crossing a boundary. And the past, represented by the tattered legions of a campaign that had been largely lost, was parading by in farewell. . . .

"Locklow next," called the conductor. He said it with the carelessness of the thousandth time, not knowing what it was that he was saying tonight.

It was dark; there were no stars. The town was a scattering of street lamps and windows that suddenly reared up out of the black. The porter took her bags and she got off. Why, there was wood underfoot just as at any other station. And when she walked, it made the same sound as at hundreds of other stations she had been in before.

She left her bags at the depot, and with two other passengers got into the one car marked "Taxi." The driver, a bald old man in suspenders, asked her "Where to?" "The Decker Hospital, please," she replied; he said, "Land sakes, another. Right. Let you off first." She huddled in her corner of the back seat, hoping that the other passengers couldn't hear the pounding.

The car halted at the foot of the hospital steps. There

were four or five men, two of them with cameras, huddled around the pedestaled globes that stood on either side of the door. They looked like what she supposed reporters and photographers looked like. They halted their conversation to inspect her as she went up and in.

The guard in the lobby, bored and a little bellicose, took the offensive. "If it's about Mr. Tennant, his condition's unchanged and no admittance to his suite. No exceptions."

"Thank you. But I—I wanted to see the staff supervisor, if I may?"

"Not here this late." The eyebrows gathered. "Was it about a job?"

". . . Yes."

"Oh." The belligerence with which he treated superiors was replaced by the contempt with which he treated equals. "Employment Office is four doors down the hall. And you'd better hurry. They close at eight-thirty."

She took his advice and hurried. Four doors down the hall, three doors, two . . . A cross-looking middle-aged woman with a puckered mouth and a mustache sat behind a desk. "Yes?" said the woman, although "no" would have been more consistent with her aspect.

"Good evening. I'm sorry to bother you at this late hour, but I'm looking for a—a friend of mine. I've just arrived in town and they told me he might be working here, as an orderly. His name is West, Victor West."

The woman shook her head decisively. "Don't believe it. Don't have one by that name." Then, in a tone which implied that Eleanor had tacitly accused her of lying, "But I'll look it up in the file, anyway."

She pulled out a drawer and flicked over some cards. "Nope. Matter of fact, no 'W' at all." She looked up almost triumphantly, as if her honesty had been vindicated.

"Oh. I see. Thank you." Now what? The one strand

had snapped. *Now* what? "I—I hate to trouble you—but do you happen to know whether he might have been in, asking for work?"

The woman replied waspishly, "How would I remember all the—"

"It would have been in the last few days."

The woman paused. "West."

"Yes. Victor West."

Grudgingly. "I think there *was*—" A paper stuck in the corner of the desk blotter. "Yes. Here it is. Been in three times in two days. Told him it was no use. We're not hiring anybody."

"Could you possibly—did he leave an address?" Speak clearly, you fool, don't croak.

"Well," suspiciously, "I don't know. How can I tell what you—"

"Please. I must find him."

The woman's mouth was set and thin. But Eleanor's eyes were desperately steady. The woman's mouth wavered; then she shrugged. "No skin off my nose. Not responsible for him—he's not an employee. He's boarding at Bannerman's over on Elm Street."

Eleanor thanked her, carefully, deliberately. Then she walked (walk, do not run, she thought, walk, walk, walk) up the marble-floored hall, down the steps past the watchful men under the lamp, along the street to the corner. There a white-haired policeman told her that Elm Street was three over and one down and Bannerman's was third from the corner.

In so many nightmares she had seen herself struggling to reach a destination, striding and striding and making no progress. As if she were beating with her feet at a sea of concrete whose current constantly carried her back. She remembered this vividly now but knew she wasn't dreaming because she could also feel fingers clutching her throat. Not

outside, around her neck—inside, in some mysterious way, clotting her breath.

Elm Street was surprisingly aptly named; the graceful trees lined the street like tall, high-pompadoured girls. There was a lamppost halfway down the block but she didn't need its help. Mrs. Bannerman had a small lighted sign on her front lawn.

Slowly now. Slowly. Don't hammer. Ring twice.

A stout woman in a bungalow apron answered the door; her hair was cut ludicrously short. "Evening."

"Good evening. I'm looking for Mr. West, Mr. Victor West. I was told he lives here."

"That's right."

"Is he in, do you know?"

"Believe so. Come in." The woman closed the door behind her. "Second floor, top of the stairs. Room Eight."

Not stairs, not firm carpeted steps, they couldn't be, she couldn't feel them. Not a point in time, not 9:01 P.M. to be followed by 9:02; a moment blasted out of sequence, stretched and distended far past endurance. . . .

8. The metal number smiled fatly at her. Light leaked under the door. He was there. Thousands of miles, fifteen years. Now only an inch of wood between them.

She did it slowly. She waited before she knocked. She felt royal, puissant, easy. After all this time, she had only to raise a hand and knock; and she made herself wait to do it (remembering absurdly the little girl who always saved the whipped cream and cherry till last).

Long enough now. Knock twice.

. . . Oh, God, what was she going to say to him? Now that she'd pursued him and found him, what was she going to *say*?

A man opened the door. He wore a dark suit with a dark shirt and a yellow tie that was badly knotted. The light in the hall was dim and there was only one lamp in the room

behind him, but she could see him. His temples were grayer than she had expected. His eyes ("Round, brown," the gong-words echoed) had deep circles under them. Each cheek had a short vertical crease in it. And there was a graying mustache. But it was Earl Seastrom, the hero.

"Yes?" His voice was different from what she had expected—but she couldn't take time now to discover why.

"Earl Seastrom." Not a question; she said it.

His eyes narrowed a little in surprise. Then he was trying to remember her. "Who are you?"

"You don't know me. We've never met. But—I've come to see you, Mr. Seastrom."

He had a lighted cigarette between his fingers; she could see it trembling slightly. But his voice was unshaken. "Did someone send you?"

"No. I wanted to see you."

. . . She thought he would never breathe, never speak again. Then he stepped aside and held the door open. "Well, come in," he said.

"Here you are, sir," said the hostess, putting the newspapers on Roy's lap. "These are the latest they had."

"Thanks, dear. You're very kind."

"Couldn't let you go tramping across the field with that bad foot every time we land."

"Oh, it's not as bad as it looks, but I'm much obliged anyway."

"You really are anxious to catch up on the news. All the papers at every stop. Didn't you see any papers in Mexico?"

"Not a one, dear." Abstractedly, as he thumbed through the pages, "And I hear that somebody is sick."

"Oh. Friend of yours?"

"Umm—sort of friend of a friend."

There was still only one lamp glowing in Room Eight. Eleanor was glad that it was off to the side, not directly behind him or her. She had been talking for almost half an hour, and if the light had been behind her, he couldn't have looked at her steadily; behind him, she couldn't have seen him clearly. All the time she had talked, she had been extraordinarily conscious of his face, its presence; its shape, its shadows, its sad, somewhat mocking quality; but most of all, its presence. As she talked and as the white wings fluttered in her, she thought: His face. Seastrom's. The one glimpse at the parade. The reckless photo in the book. The legend. That face, now, only a few feet away, in the same room. Not like the street in Huapango or the balcony in Hidalgia, not imagined. The same room.

She'd been talking about herself. The membrane of panic that had enveloped her from the moment she had knocked—as she had wondered what in heaven she would say to him—had been broken with the knowledge that she must talk about herself. What she wanted from this man couldn't be asked for in so many words; it was knowledge that couldn't be acquired, could only be given. And the one possible way that could happen was by giving herself to him first. It was only fair, as well as sensible; she had the advantage of him, she knew him; now he had to know her. He *had* to know her, he had to accept her. The spear had to be driven home, the grappling iron cast quickly or not at all. She was now, by indirection, making a swift unashamed plea to be his friend; making that plea by talking about herself.

She told him about meeting Roy; how they had started; how they had progressed; how she had come here. He listened closely, leaning forward with folded arms on his knees, his eyes caressing her face with a kind of reticent wonder, as he smoked one cigarette after another.

Only twice did his expression change. When she mentioned Peerless, one corner of his mouth pulled back in a

smile. "Excuse me. Are you saying that they want to make a movie about me?"

"Well, you'd be part of it. They want to use the story of the flight."

His smile faded. After it had faded, he said, "That's funny."

The other change was when she mentioned Señora Sandoval. As she spoke the name, he stared, then his eyes moved away. "You saw Mrs. Sandoval?"

"Yes. She was the only one who could have told me about Tucson."

He nodded, his eyes still averted. "Yeah." He stretched his mouth a bit and ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip thoughtfully. "She didn't happen to mention—that is . . . Well, never mind." He looked back at her and said softly, questioningly, "Go on."

She completed the chronicle, bringing herself to this town, this room. She hated to stop, she didn't know what would happen after she stopped, whether she had succeeded; but everything she'd said up to now had had some point. She didn't want to draw it out and begin to hear the sound of her voice.

He sat quiet for a moment, gazing at the floor. Then his head shook and he got up and went to the window. With his back to her, he said, "I'm sorry, you'll have to give me a little time. I've got to get used to all this, you coming after me and the rest of it. It's all just—landed on me."

"Yes," she said quietly, "I meant it to. I did that purposely. I had to. I didn't want our first meeting to be—ordinary."

He turned. An uncertain smile indicated that she had got her wish. He came back. "Something bothers me, something I don't get. You tell me this about following me, all the trouble you went to. That's scary enough, to think that in the last couple of weeks you and your friend have been—

hurrying up behind me. But—why did you do it? You're not with the movie company. You don't sound as if you're even very interested in that deal. I don't see what you— Well, why?"

She looked at her hands, which, she noticed, were clasped between her knees. She answered barely loudly enough to be heard. "Because I've had some trouble. Because there's something I ought to face. I—I wanted to find out whether a person could get over being—a coward. I wanted to find out how."

He made a little sound in his throat, and she glanced up. It couldn't have been merely a trick of the weak light; he looked pale. His mouth moved a couple of times before he spoke. "What made you think I could help you?"

She leaned forward. "You're not angry, are you?"

He insisted: "What made you think I could help?"

"Are you angry?"

"No, but—" He came closer, his eyes bearing down on her hotly. "Look, I'm just a guy. My name was once in the papers but that was years ago. That was years ago and now I'm just one more guy, another pair of shoes on the sidewalk. What made you think I could help?"

Her cheeks alone weren't burning, her whole body seemed shaken, as if her lives in the world and in the mind had fused toward this moment. "Because," she said calmly, although her voice seemed to her to echo, "because under the story I thought I sensed someone who did what I needed to do. Stopped running and went back, all the way. I thought I might learn."

His whole body tensed. For a moment she thought he was going to hit her. Then suddenly he turned his head and ran his hand over his hair. A big hand but not gross; with a clumsiness which she thought would prove clumsy only in the aspect, not the touch. His hair, she noted in the si-

lence, was still parted down the middle; and still didn't look ridiculous.

Finally he took a deep breath. "Look, Miss— What's your name, miss?"

"Eleanor Shafer."

"Look, Miss Shafer . . ."

An involuntary laugh came from her; his glance sharpened. "I'm sorry," she said. "It just sounded funny. After all that I've thought and—and imagined, we can't call each other 'miss' and 'mister.' It's funny."

"All right. Eleanor, then. All I know is this: I'm sitting here tonight. I'm here in this town for a reason. I'm thinking certain things. Then there's a knock on the door, and you come in and . . . Well, how could I ever have dreamed—I mean—"

She knew what he meant. To show that she understood and yet not to seem presumptuously knowledgeable, she sat a little stiffer in her chair.

Again he walked away. He picked up a trinket from the dresser—she couldn't see it, it didn't matter—and he tossed it idly in his hand a few times. Then he put it down and faced her. "It doesn't matter what you understand. I don't even know if I really like it, that maybe you understand a few things. You couldn't be just anybody; I can see that. But— Well, I've got things to do. I don't want anything to go wrong. I've got to keep organized; or everything I've been counting on for a long time goes out the window. It's the last push, and I've got to make it. Or it'd be a waste of five years. I don't even want to know who you are. Not yet."

She nodded, furiously hiding her feeling of triumph. She had arrived; the spear was driven.

He was looking at her almost sideways from the dresser. "But you couldn't be just anybody," he said.

There was a knock at the door, and he gave her a questioning glance.

"I don't know," she replied.

He walked over and opened the door. Tod Lucas was standing there.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*T*he moment she saw him Eleanor remembered one Tod especially; not the easygoing, cat-and-mouse flaneur but the angry man who had come out of the house and hit his wife. He was thick-mouthed and red now, though his voice was carefully cool.

"Surprise, surprise," he said, and came in without being asked.

"Tod," said Seastrom, following him with his eyes as he shut the door. "Hello, Tod."

Lucas gave Eleanor a surly smile; he obviously expected to see her. "Greetings, kiddo. We meet, as they say, again." He threw his hat on the bed.

"You knew I was here, Tod," she said.

The smile lingered. "I was told. I heard that you blew in tonight. I would have had the flags out for you—but I been busy." He thumbed a gesture at Seastrom. "We are aware that the professor is here for days."

"I didn't see you around, Tod," said Seastrom.

"You bet, doc. But I am informed about you. Ever

since this kid and her playmate start looking for you, we keep an eye on you. I am told when you leave Tucson."

"I ought to have known that," said Seastrom. "Well, Tod, it's been a long time. Five years."

"Yep," Tod said between his teeth, his cheeks still heavy and red, "and I did not come up here tonight for the merry old class reunion."

"So I figured," Seastrom replied quietly. Eleanor felt that he was making an effort to show Tod a new self; to demonstrate by his composure that the old Seastrom whom Tod once knew was gone. "I didn't think you came all the way from Mexico for the ride. Or up here now just to ask about my health. Well," he shrugged as if nothing could surprise him, "what is it you want, Tod?"

"Ha." Tod laughed mirthlessly, once. "A hot jest. What do *I* want." He hulked squarely around to Seastrom. "That is what I have climbed these stairs to ask *you*. What do you want?"

"From you, nothing, Tod." Seastrom put his hands on the back of a chair like an innocent prisoner in the dock. "I haven't wanted anything from you for a long time."

"Correct," rejoined Tod evenly. "Five years. When we cover up for you; and get you away and find you a job. Remember?"

"Sure."

"Glad that it is fresh in your mind. Ever since then you are a little tough to keep track of, doctor, but we manage. Even in Hidalgo, where no one would talk, we found the agent who sold you tickets to Tucson. We keep an eye on you real good after you get this hospital bug of yours. Because we want to make sure you are grateful." He bit out his words again. "That is why I am curious. What did you come to Locklow for, doc? What do you want?"

Seastrom was calm. "I got business. But don't be afraid, Tod, it's—"

Lucas cut in angrily. "Never mind me, pal, I'm not afraid. Did you really think you could get hired while the chief was here? You really think we would let them take you on?"

Seastrom hesitated. "I forgot about the boys. Should have thought of that, I guess. And now, I suppose—"

Again Lucas interrupted sharply. "Now or any time you wouldn't have made it." He advanced a step. "Goddam ungrateful son of a bitch. I came up here to paste you on the jaw. You can't make any trouble now, buster. I just came up here to slug you on principle."

"You're entitled to try," shrugged Seastrom. "But you're all wrong, Tod. I'm not going to do Tennant any harm."

"You can say that again, doc," Tod replied grimly. "You sure can't kick up any trouble now. I just came from the hospital. He's dead."

Seastrom watched him a moment as if the words were taking time to travel from Tod to him. Then, the message received and comprehended, he sat down.

Lucas said, "And that is why I came up to tell you about it, just to make you happy. And also to paste you on the jaw." But he repeated it now as if the anger had been only sufficient to bring him here and to sustain him through the telling; he didn't sound as if he were actually going to do it.

Seastrom, sitting, stared at the floor of the dimly lighted boardinghouse bedroom. "Well, I'm sorry. I wanted to see him again. I'm sorry."

Lucas hung to it now obstinately rather than angrily; the sight of Seastrom seemed to have had an effect. "I will bet that you are sorry," he sneered. "Buster, I used to like you. But I have been very nervous about you ever since you got this hospital bug of yours. And when I heard that you were on your way^h here, I figured you had some very wacky

notions. Been brooding too much, I figure. I am disappointed in you, chum. You got nothing to kick about so far as the chief was concerned. Any beef you have is your own private beef. Strictly. How come you—”

“Sit down, Tod,” said Seastrom gently. “You want to hear something? Sit down. If Tennant’s dead, I’ll tell you why I came.”

“I can hear you standing up.”

“I don’t like you to stand over me. Sit down. I’ll tell you.”

Lucas thought it over and sat down on the edge of the bed. There was silence in the room, crowding to the walls, against the ceiling. It was like a pause in stormy music, thought Eleanor; the gleam of stillness before something quiet begins.

Seastrom leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and rubbed one cheek with his knuckles. The queer smile came out to mock himself and those who saw it. “This sure has been some night. Matters coming to a head. Queer. You make up your mind a long time ahead about things. You make some plans. And it takes you—quite a while to get to the point. But when you get there, things move awful fast. Sort of like going over a hill. Slow going up. But after you’ve hit the top and start down . . .” He looked away. “And now Tennant’s dead. That makes it easier. Which is bad, because I didn’t want it easier.”

“Get to it, doctor,” said Tod brusquely. “You are telling me why you came.”

Seastrom nodded. “I’ll tell you. You won’t believe me. I’ll tell you.” He glanced at Eleanor as if to exempt her from his doubts, as if he had been reminded of something she had said.

He ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip. “I wanted to see Tennant again. I didn’t know any sure way of getting to him on my own—there were too many people

around him—so when I read that he was suddenly taken sick, I got this idea. I was ready to see him—it had taken me time to get ready—and I came on here. I wanted a job as an orderly, because I thought I might get assigned to his room. Not just because I wanted to see him; I wanted to work for him. I didn't think I'd be recognized, especially by a sick man." He touched his face. "I've changed.

"Then, when he was better, I wanted to tell him who I was. And I—" He broke off. "You remember the clergyman's letter, Tod?"

Lucas grunted. "There's a question."

"I wanted to give it to him. The letter and the check. I thought if I could do that—do that dirty work for him and then give him Rees's letter—I'd have proved something. That's all I wanted from Tennant, Tod."

Rees. The picture of the mild white-haired man in the book came back to her mind. "Rev. Howard Kemsley Rees, The Rescuer of Earl Seastrom." But what letter, what check? What did they signify?

Lucas's expression was that of a man who doesn't often meet the pure truth and doesn't often want to, but knows it when he sees it.

"However," sighed Seastrom. He got up and went over to the dresser. From a drawer he took an envelope which he carried back and held out to Tod. Seastrom said, "I can't help smiling. This has its funny side."

Lucas didn't reach for it immediately. He looked at it; he glanced up obliquely at Earl and at the letter again. Then he put out his ham-hand, took the letter and opened it. Eleanor could see that there was a check in it too.

"Jesus, Earlie," muttered Tod.

Without further delay he went over to the wastebasket, took matches from his pocket and lighted the edge of the envelope. As it burned, he said, "Fifteen years. Eh, professor?" He dropped the still-smoldering envelope into the

basket. "The headaches we had, trying to get hold of that thing. It *has* its funny side." Soon all that was left of the letter was a slight acrid smell of smoke.

Tod's voice was humble now. He was still perplexed, but it was a touched perplexity. "Earlie, what would it have proved? What you just said. What you came here for."

Seastrom made a sad small gesture of evasion, turning his palms outward at his sides, as if that were an aspect he hadn't quite intended to discuss.

"Maybe," he said after a bit, "it was the only clear way I could show him—and myself—that I'd got things straight at last, that it was just kidding myself to think he'd forced anything on me. . . . Now I could see there was no point in shifting the blame."

Tod's mouth was compressed in thoughtfulness. "I know I look dumb, Earlie, but I understand that." He waited a moment. "I wish I'd come up to see you before. But I only got in this morning, hurry call. And I've been busy all day. Wish I could have seen you before."

He lumbered over to the bed and picked up his hat. "I have to go now. There is a lot to do tonight. Anyway I don't want to stay now. I feel stupid. But could I come back and see you tomorrow? Maybe we could sit down and nibble a few beers. We used to be pals."

"O.K., Tod, sure. I don't know when I'll be around, though. I have something of my own to do tomorrow."

"Well, I will take a chance and drop by. I owe it to myself." To Eleanor, he said, "Kid, you would never have got up here tonight if we had not all been busy. But I'm glad you did. Any business you and your pal wish to talk now with the professor is fine by me." Looking at the wastebasket, "Very fine."

He hesitated and finally put his hand on the seated Seastrom's shoulder. "Je regret, Earlie. Je regret very much that

I made like Jack Dalton foiling the foul murderer. . . . See you tomorrow."

He went out, and they listened to him go down the stairs; each step seemed to wince as he put his weight on it. The front door shut.

Eleanor knew she couldn't be the first to speak. She had been only incidentally present, and she had no right to utter the first words now; she hadn't contributed anything to the ringing hush that held the room. Besides, she didn't know what Seastrom was thinking; she was afraid to make a blunder.

He seemed to sense this. He glanced at her, smiling a little embarrassedly, like an orator who has displayed his feelings to a multitude and must now meet one of them face to face. "Well, here we are," he shrugged. "A couple of hours ago I never heard of you. Now you're sort of—in on things. I don't know what to say."

She thought she ought to offer to go. While Tod had been there, there hadn't been a chance to leave; besides, neither of the men had seemed to mind her staying. Now, however, she thought she ought to make the offer.

But before she could speak, he rose and slowly went to the window. "It's turned out to be a nice night. Are you too tired after your trip? Or would you want to go for a walk? Maybe you'd rather go find a hotel?"

She shook her head. "I don't feel as if I'll ever sleep again."

It was surprising to her how few words were needed between them, yet it was only mildly surprising, as if she might have expected it if she had taken the trouble to think about it. They walked for a while, then they stopped in an almost deserted diner for coffee, after which they resumed their walk. He felt free enough now to ask her some ques-

tions, about herself—who she was, where she came from. She was careful to ask him very little.

She knew what he was doing; he was trying to make her real. Her story had descended on him like a landslide; he had heard it but he hadn't yet quite grasped that it had actually happened, that such a person as herself actually existed. She understood this because it was precisely the unreality in the face of facts that she had felt when she met him. It was easier for him because he had never heard of her until that meeting and so didn't have to cope with his imagination; but it was something of the same thing.

For long stretches while they walked they were quiet, without strain or embarrassment. Although it still seemed somewhat fantastic that she was walking beside this man and that he was aware of her existence, the ease of being with him, even when there was no talk, helped convince her that it was true, not another Mexican dream.

She thought they had been walking for hours but a clock on a school tower showed her that less than an hour had elapsed since they had left the house. The act of walking confused her time sense; she always thought walks took longer than in fact they did.

They came to a bridge over a wide creek. The few clouds in the sky were scattering and the moon peered through at the stream. Halfway over the bridge they found a bench. "Are you tired?" he asked. "You probably are. Let's sit down."

"I'm not tired, really, but I'd like to sit here."

They sat. He tipped his hat back on his head and folded his hands in front of him. He patted his thumbs together.

Off at the other end of the night an express train rattled through the station. Below them the water murmured insinuatingly.

"Did you ever know Tennant?" he asked.

"No. I used to be in Washington a lot, but I don't think

I ever met him. I used to hear that he might be president someday."

"Yes or no, he sure wanted to be. Now he's dead. Back there." The echo of the train's whistle dissolved into nothing. His thumbs were still. "What I told Lucas back in the room, what I wanted to do here—did that sound silly to you?"

"You know it didn't. You know it couldn't. I didn't understand it all—the letter—but . . . but . . ."

Moon in, moon out and in again. Silvered clouds and the slow-breathing imminence of the sleeping town.

"I guess I'll talk to you," said Seastrom. "I hardly know you, but in a way that makes it easier. Like I said before, you're not just anybody. You—you'd listen right. And it's easier to talk to you now than when I know you better—if I ever do. Besides, you already guessed a lot. Somehow.

"Anyway, everyone's going to know soon. It would have had to wait until after—after Tennant. I wish I could have done that; it would have rounded things off. But I can't. So tomorrow everyone knows.

"As far as I remember," he said, "I've told only two before. Justin Quinn. And Mrs. Sandoval."

My ears, the pounding in my ears, she thought. I wish my heart would stop; then the blood wouldn't pound and I could hear what he's saying. I want all the words, every word, and the pounding is in the way.

The moon came out again; there were no more clouds in sight. "Just my luck," he said. "I wished it would stay dark."

He took a deep breath—not a sigh. "It's not much to tell. It's easy to say. I was dead drunk all during that New Zealand flight.

"Almost the whole time we were out of sight of land. Almost the whole fifty-eight hours. I was O.K. at the start I even took the ship up. But after we got out of sight of land . . .

"I'd sneaked it aboard. Thermos bottles. A flask. I knew I'd be scared, but it was a lot of money that Tennant offered; and I thought, with a little nip now and then . . . just to steady me . . .

"Connell had to take over. He had to do it alone. The weather turned bad on us and he never had a chance to leave his seat. And whenever my head cleared and I saw the ocean . . . I was always scared of water ever since I was a kid . . . well, whenever I saw it, I took another nip. Connell had to do it alone. At the end he dozed. And we crashed and he was killed. And I lived. . . .

"In the water," he said after a time, "the water brought me to. I was scared and safe both . . . in the water . . ."

The words, the voice itself were transfigured into actuality, place, fact. . . . Sky, black above but not so black as the ocean below. The salt ugly taste. The cold, so cold it left his body senseless. Bobbing in the life belt like a child on the lap of the world. The only real presence, the only thing there with him in the measureless dark, his will to live. To tell the truth. To pay.

"I could remember his face just before we hit. Even drunk, I could remember how he'd looked at me. I didn't want to die till I'd done something about that."

She had tried to keep her eyes away but now she couldn't resist a quick glance. He caught the glance and grinned a little, but it was a surface grin, imposed; it had no more relation to the man underneath than a mask suddenly lifted to his face. His hand trembled badly as he brought out cigarettes and offered her one, which she declined, then lighted his own.

The splotch of the match was followed by the diamond of the cigarette. He sat quiet for a while. She wanted to join him there in the past, she wanted to be there with the young Seastrom, fifteen years before, in the cruel sea. She saw him sitting here grinning with shame for that man, and she

wanted to have been there too so that now she could be ashamed like him and victorious.

"Then, in the morning," he said, "this man came along in a boat. This clergyman, Rees. He found me and took me in. I told him. I babbled pretty fast, I guess. I told him everything. I wanted to tell everybody and he was the first. I remember *his* face too.

"He got me to his house. Then Lucas came. . . ."

"Ah," she caught her breath. "The forty minutes."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"It was in the book."

"Oh. Yes . . ."

It was in those forty minutes when Tod had let no one else in that the reporter had persuaded him. Heard the truth and persuaded him to hold his tongue; to carry it off. The entire world was watching, Lucas said, as indeed it seemed to be. He had to keep quiet; he had to be the hero. Or all of them—this whole country—would look foolish and silly to the world.

"I listened. I let him. It was easier . . . The clergyman too. He listened to Tod too. Tod could talk; he convinced Rees too. Same arguments. And a check."

Then, with the secret sealed, Lucas had thrown open the door of the room. And then it had begun for Seastrom. The enormous, horrible farce. And all the time, knowing.

"Imagine." He grinned uneasily. "The parades, the medals, the cheers . . . Can you imagine . . .?"

"Yes," she said.

At last—ages after—the spotlight shifted. The headlines and banners and confetti were whirled away on the wind. He was offered a job, an excellent job with an excellent company. Everything was excellent. And one day, six months later, a letter came.

"From Rees. He sent back Tod's check—uncashed. He sent it to me instead of Tennant or Lucas because he'd seen

in the papers where I was working. He was a dying man, he said—he died soon after—and he didn't want this on his conscience. He'd promised to keep the secret; that was bad enough. He hadn't promised to keep the money. He left my life to my conscience.

"I kept the letter. Like that crazy itch to tear open a wound. I wanted it around—to hurt."

Soon he'd lost the excellent job, with drinking. Then he had another job, not quite so excellent. And another a little less excellent.

"One day I ran into Tod again in Chicago. I knew that he and his boss had been awful relieved when the public got tired of me and looked around for someone else to cheer. They hoped I was gone for good. Yesterday's hero. I couldn't even get to see Tennant any more. I told Tod how I was feeling—we met in a bar—and he advised me to keep things quiet. For my own good. I'd only hurt myself, he said. If anything came out, he and Tennant were in the clear, he said. They could always say that they hadn't been in the plane, they didn't know what had happened there, they'd just taken my word.

"I was drunk that day, I suppose. I was drunk most of the time those days. I told him about Rees's letter, and the check. I don't suppose I'd have told him if I was sober; I knew it might be dangerous. And if I hadn't put it in a safe place, out of their reach. But I told him.

"Well," he grinned again, "you'd have been surprised how I got treated from then on. Day and night. They always kept an eye on me, always. Made sure I had a little money. The higher Tennant went in the world, the less I had to worry about. They took care.

"Then one day—years later, I suppose—I turned up—how, I wonder how?—at Tod's house. Down by the lake. Patzcuaro."

A little time had passed, washed over them like the stream below over the rocks. The tumult of pity subsided somewhat in her. Indeed, she knew that this pity was anachronistic and impertinent; he had come a long way from Patzcuaro. Still that same strange pity she had felt when she had heard of the men he had assaulted in Mexico persisted to some degree. And it was still for him, not for the man he had indirectly killed; perversely it sought him out because he had been her companion in horror. They had both looked out at the world from the heart of the fire; it gave them the kinship of the stake.

"That was the letter you gave Tod tonight," she said at length.

His hand fidgeted on his knee. "That's right."

"And what you're going to do tomorrow—when you say everyone is going to know—you're going to tell the truth about—the whole thing."

"Yes. There are a lot of newspapermen in town because of Tennant. It won't be hard to get a hearing." He turned to her slightly, smiling at himself again. In the moonlight his eyes still were brown and very deep. "Does it sound crazy? I mean, at this late date . . ."

"It's not late for you."

His eyes narrowed on her face. She could see that they were less and less strangers.

"You've been trying to get here as quickly as you could. Ever since Quinn. Ever since you saved his life."

The smile lingered. "By accident. I just fell in the water that day and found out I still knew how to swim. In spite of a scare when I was a kid; and the crash. He was there and I grabbed him. Without thinking. That was what—what shocked me. I did it without thinking. . . . But it still took awhile after that to—to get myself in shape."

"The hospital jobs . . ."

"Well," he shrugged, "you sort of have to break your-

self down, convince yourself that you're not very much, before you can just go ahead and put your head on the block. Even a guy as low as I was then takes a lot of convincing that he doesn't matter. Working for other people, in a dirty job, was one way of doing it, I thought."

. . . She recalled the night in the Hotel Londres when she'd learned about Van Nuys. She thought of the next day and the vaudeville theater. She thought of the word "coward." The sudden perception of the ego that clamored for your safety in the herd, the ego that wouldn't allow you to be ostracized, no matter how little place you had in the world. She remembered realizing that until that hated safeguard was beaten down it would beat her, it would turn her away from right and light and danger into the comfortable motherly dark.

Now the strange thing she felt was that he had done all this for her. She felt almost as if she had shared the humiliation and service that had freed him, as if in that vicarious sharing she, too, had been freed. As if his penance had earned her absolution . . .

He got up slowly, with the subdued, sympathetic tiredness that seemed to invest every line of his body. "I don't want to talk any more now. You can talk a thing to death. Especially things like this. That's enough for now."

She nodded and rose too. "All right. I won't say anything on the way back. Just let me," she said, "just let me take your arm."

At the corner of Elm Street they halted. "I think I'll go home now," he said. "I don't want to take you to your hotel, see you to your door like a little gentleman. This night's been too different—just to end up like a date. I'll turn off here."

"If you like. May I come over to see you tomorrow?"

"Hell, of course." For the first time he looked at her

without diffidence or the mocking smile. "Want to know where you are, and so forth."

She would have liked to watch him walk down the street, to savor the last morsel of this evening, but she was afraid he might look back and see her; so she walked on. She found a cab which took her to the depot for her bags and brought her back to what, according to the driver, was the de-luxest hotel in town. She registered, then wired Roy: "Have found him. Will wait for you Mountview Hotel here."

When she got into bed she thought: Tonight is one night I'm not going to chop over what's happened. I'm just going to let it have happened. I'm just going to let it be added into my head without first taking it to pieces. I'm going to let it have been; and, having been, have its effect.

As she stretched comfortably under the blanket she felt floating and warm, suffused with peace and timelessness. The feeling reminded her of something, she couldn't quite recall what. Just before she dozed off she remembered; it was like going to sleep the night after she had first made love.

Having sent the telegram to him only the night before, she was a little surprised when the telephone rang the next morning and she heard Roy say, "Eleanor? Good morning."

"Roy! For heaven's sake!" She looked around to make sure she was awake. "Where—where are you?"

"Downstairs."

"But—I wired you only last night."

"Quick, what?" He chuckled. "I started as soon as I got your wire from Tucson. I figured if he was here, fine. If not, I could tell the Coast just as easily from here, and I wouldn't have to waste time catching up with you again."

"Oh. That was clever. But how could you travel? How's your foot?"

"I'll show you. May I come up?"

She glanced at herself. "Give me five minutes, Roy."

"Reluctantly. O.K."

Ten minutes later he went up in the elevator, holding his breath lest the ancient lift disintegrate like the one-hoss shay. He limped down the hall with his cane, and just before he got to her door she opened it. She was dressed but sleep still hung about her; he thought she looked new-hatched.

"Hello, Eleanor," he said and after the briefest pause kissed her cheek.

"Why, you walk very well."

"So young too." She laughed and looked at the scratch on his temple. "It's better. May I come in? As long as I'm in the neighborhood."

"Of course." She laughed again and closed the door after him. "This is fine, Roy. I needed you today. I needed you in a hurry."

"Where is he?" asked Roy. "Is he in Locklow?"

"Yes."

"In this hotel? Where? When do we see him? Do you know that Tennant's dead?"

She told him where Seastrom was and that they could go over to see him this morning. Then she recounted the whole story, including the arrival of Tod and the letter; and since this was Roy she was talking to and since Seastrom was going to make it public today anyway, she told him the essentials of the conversation on the bridge.

Roy looked abstracted when she finished. Then he said, "I'm much too excited and rushed and everything to make any sensible comment on all that. I'll have to let it sink in. But," he added soberly, "I *know* what you just told me, Eleanor. What it amounts to is—Seastrom made it."

"Yes. That's right."

Roy nodded. "That's our boy," he said quietly. "And did you find out—what you wanted to know?"

"A good deal of it. But I also found out that I'd known some of it all along. Last night it was just—uncovered."

"Yeah." He sighed. "Well, Socrates said all learning is remembering." He didn't want to hurry her, but as soon as he felt he could, he said, "Pardon my crassness, but this is how it all started. What did he say about our proposition? Is he interested?"

Her hand went to her mouth. "Oh, my goodness, Roy, do you know I—I—"

He leaned back and laughed loudly. "I knew it," he said when he was able to speak, "I *knew* it! After all the fuss to find him, I knew you'd forget to mention the thing that started it all."

"I did mention it, Roy, once. But—"

He nodded, giggling. "But it got lost in the shuffle. I mighta known."

As if to prove that this wasn't entirely so, she said stoutly, "And I remember that Tod said he was on our side now."

"Yeah," nodded Roy, "I guess the thorn is out of the lion's paw. Matter of fact, the lion's dead. Well, when can we go see Seastrom?"

"As soon as we like. We'd better go early, Roy. He's going to be busy this afternoon." A realization clarified in her mind. "Oh, yes. You'd probably better see him as quickly as possible. Peerless may not be interested in him this afternoon."

"Why not?"

"He's going to see the reporters and tell them what I've told you."

Roy stared off thoughtfully for a moment. When he was thoughtful he looked younger than ever. "I suppose I ought not to go barging in on him at this moment. I've got an idea that, for him, I'm selling last year's eggs. But I've got to make a try, for the old home team."

"Yes," she agreed, considering it, "I think you ought to make the offer. You owe that much, I guess, to everyone

concerned. I don't think anything's going to come of it, Roy, but . . ."

"Neither do I, frankly."

"But . . ."

"Exactly."

"Can you walk over?"

"Sure. I just carry the cane for sympathy."

As they proceeded down the shop-studded main street, she asked, "Incidentally, Roy, how did you know what hotel I was at?"

"There are only three in town. I took a look at the outside of the other two and then went on to the Mount-view."

As they turned into Elm Street, he said, "God, I'm excited." He added, "Even though it's an absolutely gone goose as far as Peerless is concerned. If he's made up his mind . . . if he's taken so long to make it up . . . Maybe it's a little impudent of me to buzz in now with . . ."

"Well, it's up to you, Roy, but I've already mentioned it to him. It can't do any harm to settle it finally, one way or the other. And you won't offend him, I assure you."

"No," said Roy soberly, "no, I don't suppose I'm capable."

Mrs Bannerman answered their ring and told them that Mr. West had gone out a few minutes previously. A gentleman had called—the same man who had been there the night before—and had taken Mr. West out to breakfast. She wasn't sure where they'd gone but they'd asked her to recommend an eating place and she had suggested her cousin's—the LilyBen Coffee Shoppe, two blocks down.

They found the two men in the LilyBen, in a booth at the rear, talking earnestly. At least Tod was talking. Seastrom was having toast and coffee, Lucas was having coffee and a cigar. In the morning light Seastrom's face was a

paradox: it looked older, more lined, but the tone of his skin was fresher, clean.

"Ah," said Lucas, glancing up, "we are joined."

"Mr. Seastrom," said Eleanor, "Mr. West, this is Roy Anderson. I told you about him last night."

"Oh, sure," he nodded. He got up, awkwardly between the table and the close seat, and held out his hand. "How are you, Mr. Anderson?"

Roy took his hand firmly. Eleanor liked the way Roy shook hands; there was an instant perception of his niceness in it, invitation without false salesmanlike gush.

"I'm happy to meet you, Mr. Seastrom," he said. "Please sit down, won't you?"

"Welcome to America, doctor," said Lucas; and with concern, "Something wrong with your foot?"

"Oh," replied Roy cheerfully, "nothing I can't put on the expense account. Hiya, Tod."

Lucas grinned. "You are a character," he said. "Incidentally, you might care to know, chum, that I was in touch with friends on the Coast late last night. Things being what they are now, the hounds have been called off."

"You mean my job is safe?" asked Roy with mock awe.

Tod continued to grin. "Yep. And you can talk to ol' Earl about your movie. But you will have to talk hard. He has—some ideas of his own."

Eleanor saw in Tod's face something she had sensed when they came in. Now she knew what it was. Earl had told him what he was going to do this afternoon; and Tod, if she could read him at all, was a little frightened under his professed blandness.

"You know about it, then, Mr. Seastrom?" said Roy.

"You'd better call me Earl, Roy. Save time."

"All right, Earl, thanks. Well, you know that this deal would mean a big chunk of money?"

"Yes. And I'm grateful for it, Roy. The offer and all

the trouble you took to find me. But I'm afraid I can't go along with you. You yourself, you'll probably want to withdraw the offer after this afternoon. But even if you don't, I'm afraid the movie would be out."

"You see what I mean?" said Tod to Roy. He turned back to Seastrom. "Earlie, it is a perfect setup. It is a thing. You have already whacked yourself good for what was bothering you. Why push it? Now you can collect and take it easy."

"I guess not, Tod. It's just not what I had in mind."

Roy laughed. "Didn't think I'd live to see the day, Tod. You working my side of the street."

Tod shrugged his shoulders. "Policy makes strange bed-fellows, kid. We've had a change of policy. . . . Earl, you should ought to listen to the doctor here. Take his deal and close the matter up for good."

Seastrom shook his head, as if he was sorry to discom-mode anyone and make an issue of his decision. "No, Tod. The matter's been closed up long enough. Nothing's changed yet. Just been working up enough nerve to start."

Tod sat back grudgingly. Then Roy said, "Ah, the hell with the picture. The hell with Peerless. You're perfectly right, Earl."

Tod's eyebrows lifted. "Talk about switches."

"He is right," said Roy. "I envy him."

"Envy him what?" asked Lucas.

"He knows what," said Roy.

They left the coffee shoppe and strolled over to the town square. Only a few old men were sitting in the park so early in the morning. There was an empty bench facing a cast-iron statue to the town's Civil War dead. The four of them, three of them lately enemies, sat there in the morning sun and smoked.

"O.K.," said Tod at last, "let the picture go. Forget it. I can see how that it would be kind of like—well, copping a plea and still keeping the loot. If that is the way he feels

about it, O.K. But the ol' professor did a helluva thing last night. I want to see him get the best break from here on in."

Why? thought Eleanor. Why is it upsetting him so greatly? The man who had conspired with Tennant against Seastrom for fifteen years seemed to her to be protesting too much and too suddenly. After the letter had been burned, why should he feel more than relief?

Tod went on. "Earlie, maybe I had a hand in fouling things up for you before this. I couldn't do anything else at the time. The chief was always good to me and I was his boy. But now . . ."

Seastrom flipped away the end of a cigarette. "It's all right, Tod." He seemed just a little impatient as he blew out smoke through his nostrils. "Everything's all right. I'm all right. I've got everything I've wanted for years. I've got the nerve to go over to the hospital and tell those guys my right name and face the works alone. I can be Seastrom again. All the way."

"Oh," Tod groaned. "Anderson, you're a bright boy. Can't you say something?"

"Not yet," said Roy quietly. "I'm thinking."

Seastrom smiled a little. "It's nice of everyone to be so upset, but it's a waste of time. Honest. I'm—Christ, I'm happy."

"I'm not upset, Earl," said Eleanor.

"No," he acknowledged with a nod, "I forgot."

"And *why* not?" Tod asked her. "Why aren't you on our side? Don't you know what he's in for?"

"I can imagine it," she said, "and I'm a good imaginer. What I don't understand is why you're suddenly so interested in his welfare."

"Oh, kid," he twisted his head to one side, "that is unkind. I have always liked Earlie. You know that."

"You've always said so, probably. But if you don't mind my pointing it out, it's been a long time since you took such

a personal interest." She remembered that Seastrom had told her how eager Tod and Tennant had been after the flight to close the door and wash their hands of him, regardless of what happened to the man they'd shut out. She pressed forward confidently now. They were no longer strangers in Tod's camp, he was in theirs; and under his solicitude she felt a very special pleading. "The letter was burned. You're free and clear. I don't see why you're so anxious."

Tod shook his head. "I have told you, one and all, that—"

"—that you like Earl very much." She felt Seastrom's eyes on her. She continued quietly but earnestly: "And that's the only reason, Tod?"

Tod chewed his cigar. Then a grin of cherubic innocence spread over his fat farm-boy face. "So I am also a bit of a louse," he said. "So I have also got a personal reason. That does not mean that what I have been saying is not true. It is just an extra reason."

"Like what, Tod?" asked Earl. "What can be bothering you now?"

"Oh, professor," chided Tod gently, "use the old bean. You say you have come here to cut yourself free, to face the works alone. But there is no such thing as 'alone' in a clam-bake like this. Burn the letter or not. It cannot be done. Look, Earlie, so you try to do it alone. So you state that you were the only one responsible. Then comes an investigation. Maybe a Congressional investigation. Could very well be. So they put you on the stand and you are very happy to get the pasting they give you, but then some corn-fed senator asks you whether you are prepared to swear that neither Tennant nor me nor anyone else ever knew the inside dope about this—and especially that we didn't know about it at the time of the flight. Would you be prepared to swear that, Earlie?"

Seastrom gripped his thighs. In a moment he said, "You think that would come up?"

"I have been through this type thing, doc. It would come up. Sure as Christmas."

"That's cute," said Seastrom hollowly. "That's very cute."

"And when it has come up, where are you? You, being you, would have to tell the truth. And me—and Tennant's family and the whole string of papers—are in the well-known soup. I held off with this line because it was a kind of left hook. And after what's happened, Earlie, I did not think you would be interested in doing me favors. I hoped I could sell you a bill without it. But now it is good to mention it. Because I do not want to be in the soup, Earlie. Neither do any of the other parties concerned. But what is more important, you do not want to put us there."

"No," murmured Seastrom, "I don't. The whole point."

He shifted uneasily. Then he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and Eleanor's heart clenched as she saw the look on his face, the little smile of dismay, the fingers trembling. She saw the five years clouding over. She wanted to cry out recklessly for him to go ahead with his shriving, regardless of those who would be hurt along the way. . . . But she knew he couldn't do it. And she didn't say anything, even anything calmer; she was afraid of sounding proprietary.

"Maybe," said Roy, "maybe I have an idea." Seastrom looked around slowly, putting the brown eyes and the small despairing smile on him. "Do you mind my having an idea about it, Earlie?"

Seastrom was evidently still a bit uncomfortable at having so many people discuss his affairs after five years of wrestling with them alone. But, as he had said, he needed help. He shrugged, still smiling. "Throw me a rope, if you've got one."

"Well," said Roy carefully, so as not to betray how proud of himself he was, "well, what you object to, Earl, is—let's call it the Seastrom legend—remaining on the books. You want that to be corrected."

"Yes. That's what I've been heading toward. I—I can't live with that still standing there." He sounded as if it were at his shoulder.

"Well, maybe this would do it. Maybe this would clear the records and not hurt anybody else. Earl, suppose that you had died. In Mexico. Some time ago. For all anyone knows, you could have. There are lots of places down there where you might have disappeared, out-of-the-way places where there's no chance of checking records. And suppose, as you lay dying, to clear your conscience, you had written a letter. Say, to Tod here. Telling him the truth."

"Terrific!" said Tod immediately but softly. "Kid, this is a terrific flash." Tod, when enthusiastic, spoke even slower than usual and pronounced the indefinite article "a" as a long vowel. "That is a ten-strike right down the alley."

"Yes," said Eleanor soberly, "I ought to have known we could depend on Roy for a good, working compromise."

Seastrom said nothing. He still leaned forward on his knees, listening. Tod, however, was really excited. "It is perfect. It is eighteen carat. I can see the whole thing—like that." A snap of the fingers. "The professor writes me a letter, dated a year or so back. It says that he is sick down in some Indian village, in Chiapas or some place like that. Not long for this world. He tells what he wants to tell about the flight. And I release it to the press a few days from now. I say that I kept it under wraps till after the chief died, to spare him the embarrassment of knowing he'd backed a—a—"

"Fraud," said Seastrom.

"Well, anyhow, now my public spirit has got me by the

throat. I cannot rest until I make the truth known and the record is cleared."

"And I keep on being Victor West, hmm?"

"That is it. You have straightened the matter out, you have not hurt anybody, and you have given Seastrom the black eye you want to give him. What else?"

"If the chief witness is dead," put in Roy, "they can't investigate. They'll simply change the record about you, and that will be the end of it. Right, Tod?"

"Could not be righter. Unless—" He slapped the arm of the bench. "There is only one catch. How did you travel in and out of Mexico, Earlie? Under what name?"

"I went in on Seastrom's passport. But I couldn't use it coming out. I was Victor West by then, and I wanted to avoid . . . I guess I crossed back illegally."

"Perfectamente!" said Tod. "So there is a record of Seastrom going into Mexico, but there is no record that he came out. It is sewed up, hemstitched. You can be West the rest of your life. Because there's not much chance of your being recognized now, Earlie," he added as kindly as possible.

"I know. I know that by now."

"And," Roy continued, presenting him with what he secretly felt to be the prize in the package, "you get the chance to go on, as West, doing something useful with your life. Whatever you choose. The other way you'd be stymied. You'd have the Indian sign on you. All you can do the other way is straighten out the old story. This way you not only can straighten out the past, you can do something about the future."

Seastrom nodded as if he might reply, but he didn't. The atmosphere of reply faded into neutral silence as he sat back again staring at the cast-iron soldier who held his permanently rippled banner to the breeze.

Tod watched him for a while, then he looked at Roy. After that he looked at Eleanor, who sat on the other side

of Seastrom, her hands in her lap, her head averted. "Kid, which side are you on now?"

She turned back to them. She had thought that she knew which side she was on, but the devilish, insidious quality of a compromise was that it often made a great deal of sense. "I'm not sure."

Seastrom glanced at her with some concern and Tod, noting the glance, evidently suspected that her word would carry weight. "Well," said Tod, "leave me help you to make up your mind. So I admit I have an ax to grind. O.K. But that does not take away one bit from what will happen to Earlie himself. Absolutely happen."

"First of all, fifteen years old or not, it is an exposé. And that is always the juiciest news. The papers and the radio will wring every drop out of it. They will fix it so that he has a permanent can tied to him. They will fix it so that he will even find it hard to make a living. I know how it all will be; I have had a hand in these scalpings myself. They will strip him to the skin, and then keep going."

"It is a sure thing. They have a double reason. First of all, just because it is good old cut-'em-up news. Second, every rival paper in the country will love, but love, to give this deal the works because at the same time they will also be taking a healthy crack at the Tennant chain for having been took in. So they will bounce Earlie around even harder than usual."

"And then, like I mentioned, since he got a medal by special Act of Congress, there may very well be a Congressional investigation. And my only comment on that is 'Oh, brother.'"

"Yep," sighed Tod, "there'd be all *kinds* of mess. And what the hell, he doesn't have to punish himself all that distance. If he doesn't want the movie-pitcher money, O.K., let it ride. But let him keep being Victor West and let Seastrom die."

. . . Tod had done it for her, more than he knew. He had made the excoriation and public flogging seem so acute that she found a strange area of her emotions awakened. She wanted to protect Seastrom. She forgot everything that was hanging over her own head in an impulse to interpose herself between him and this danger.

And that's strange, she thought. I was so anxious for him to see it through to the end, bitter as it might be. I was so blithely willing for him to suffer as a kind of object lesson for me. But now—it's as if I wanted to shield him, to take over for him. As if, having learned a little from him, I could say to the mob, "He's done his share. Now me."

Seastrom seemed to hear her thinking, if not her thoughts; he turned to her now and said, "Well, Eleanor. You understand. What do you say?"

She *couldn't* say. She couldn't put in words what she saw now clearly, that Roy's clever scheme took care merely of the externals. Only she could preserve its inner purpose, could protect Seastrom from the public scourging and still not negate his aim.

She would have to go home. It was crystal clear; very simple, now that she took the trouble to think it in just those terms. She would have to go home and do what she had to do. So that she could carry this matter through and yet spare him. He had spared her the five years of drudgery, had done the spadework; it was for her, having profited by that drudgery, to take up the burden now. Share and share. He had forged the weapon; she must now use it. It was the only way he could be saved further horror and still not feel bilked.

"Earl, it wouldn't all be wasted," she said. "Some of it . . . I . . . I . . ."

He stared at her. The mask-smile died, and the face of the brown-eyed graying old-young man was startlingly revealed in the sun. The ex-hero. The coward of the world made whole.

Traffic passed. Children played. The sun moved. Seastrom got up and walked away. Eleanor remembered what Charlotte had said about his walk, that it wasn't a free and easy stride. It was true. It was an invisibly burdened step. He had risen from the bench so slowly, he walked so slowly, they thought he was only going to take a turn around the park and then rejoin them. But he kept on; out of the square, across the street, around the corner.

They sat there awhile, wondering what he had decided: whether he was going to the hospital to see the reporters or whether he was going to take Roy's suggestion. Then they agreed not to wait any longer. Tod said he had some things to attend to; Roy and Eleanor went to get some breakfast for Roy.

At five o'clock she and Roy were sitting in her room. It had been an inconclusive, motionless, irritating day. Roy hadn't known whether to wire his studio or what to wire them; Eleanor had felt restless and unsure, not knowing whether to stay or go or where to go. It was one of those formless times, when the shape of action depends on another, when only someone else can resolve the dispersed elements into a pattern.

Shortly after five the telephone rang. She answered. "Professor's just been to see me," said Tod. "He's taking Anderson's suggestion." He sounded oddly unjoyful for a man whose neck had just been saved. "He gave me the 'death-bed confession.' Been writing it all afternoon."

"Oh, I see," said Eleanor. Well, now it was all hers. She had asked for it, she had said she was ready; now it was hers. She was less excited than she had imagined she would be: it was more a feeling of things falling into place. "Are—are we going to see him again?"

"Yes, he wanted me to fix a date for us all. We're meeting him later for dinner."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*A*t last Roy was able to finish off his assignment. He telegraphed the Coast that he had traced Seastrom down to the last possible source and had found conclusive secret information that the man was dead. Besides, there were complications in the matter soon to be made public. There was no point in the studio's waiting any longer. The only thing to do (he suggested) was to excise Seastrom from the script—weakening though it would be—and release their publicity on the picture in order to get the jump on Ajax. If Peerless couldn't have him, at least no other studio would get him; and at least they'd found it out quicker than anyone else and could exploit that saving of time.

Eleanor spent most of the hour until dinner lying in a warm tub thinking about New Gilead. Not about Ralph or Van Nuys or the task that lay ahead of her; she thought of the town itself. Her town, to which, thanks to Earl, she could now return. And now that it was possible for her to go back, the very thought of that possibility strengthened her. She remembered from college (where they had given her labels to identify matters which she had later to learn) that

there were two principal types of motivation: mechanism and teleology. Roughly, impulse and goal. The first, the impulse, had been clarified and released in her. And now she also possessed the second, now the prospect of the green-and-white town rose before her as an attainable goal. Besides the spring uncoiling within her, driving her forward, there was now also something ahead drawing her and by which she now felt a right to be drawn.

The thought of going back was like returning to her father again, but this time not in weakness. Independently, as his equal in resolve; as his daughter, not his child.

Tod and Seastrom were waiting for them at the appointed restaurant. Seastrom was smaller than the big beefy man, but even next to Tod he didn't look really small. She looked at his compactly molded head, the high cheekbones with the paradoxically rounded cheeks, the echoing eyes. A man. A member of the tribe. One of the race, washed in the burning stream.

The first thing he said was to Eleanor. "Tod told you."
"Yes."

He said, almost tentatively, "I don't need to say what helped to change my mind."

"No." I accept, she thought. I'm glad—I think I'm glad—to accept.

A waitress came, and they ordered. Roy and Tod had whopping dinners.

Seastrom's eyes came back to Eleanor but he looked away before he spoke. "Right now I feel funny. Cut loose. Like a man who's been married for years and his wife dies."

"Relax, professor," counseled Tod. "You have done your stint. The books are balanced."

Seastrom shrugged irritably. "Books don't get balanced. I'm not looking for balanced books. I just hope . . . oh, well."

"Give it time," said Tod. "It's only a few hours since you changed your mind."

The waitress arrived with soup and departed with melon rinds.

"You know, Earl," Roy said amiably as he picked up his spoon, "you're dead already. I wired my studio just before dinner that I had reliable secret information of your death, and other matters. When I write my report, I'll say I ran into Tod here and he told me, in advance, about your letter."

"Good enough," agreed Lucas. "And I'll plant the letter in a couple of days. And so," he beamed, "everybody's happy, everybody gets what he wants, and everything is all wrapped up in one hundred per cent moisture-proof cellophane. Thank, to coin a phrase, God."

"You will have been dead about a year, Earlie," he continued. "I mean—Vic. Vic from now on. And, by the way, Vic, you had better blow out of here, the sooner the quicker. Just for the safe side. It is possible that some old hand might turn up to cover the funeral train, some guy who would not recognize you by yourself but might smell something if he saw you in the same town with me. And then might smell something stronger when the letter comes out."

West nodded. "Guess you're right. But I haven't had time yet to think where to go. I have no plans. You see," he said, "I didn't think I'd need any."

The idea must have been lodged in a corner of Eleanor's mind some time before because she didn't have to think about it now; it seemed inevitable and natural. She spoke like an actor on cue. "Victor, why don't you come home with me for a while?"

"With you." He seemed to pick up the suggestion and examine it.

"To Connecticut. New Gilead. I live there with my aunt. It's a big house, there's plenty of room. And it—it's a very pleasant town."

It's only fair, she thought. He ought to be allowed to watch. The attempt would never be made except for him.

He rubbed his cheek with his knuckles. Tod and Roy watched him curiously. "I don't know."

"Sounds to me like a good suggestion, Vic," said Tod. "You say you're a little rocky right now. Give you a corner to sit in before you get back in there again."

"Funny," he shook his head, "it's tough for me to decide even a thing like that. I've been set for such a long time." He hesitated. "Eleanor, are you sure—"

"Of course. I wish you'd come."

"I mean, you don't feel that—"

"No. I wish very much that you'd come. You'd be doing me a favor."

He looked at her a moment longer, then ducked his head in a little nod of acknowledgment. "O.K. Fine. Thanks very much. It's very nice of you. Matter of fact, damned handy right now. Wouldn't have known where in the world to go. Gives me a chance to . . ." He smiled. "Sure. Sorry to have been so dumb about it. I'd like to come, Eleanor, thanks."

Tod grinned. "Now everything is supersettled."

When Roy was alone with her later he mentioned that as long as he was this close to New York, he might as well run up to see his publishing friends and give them his answer personally about that job. Then he cocked an eye at her.

"All right," she smiled. "When you've finished your business in New York, you come up to New Gilead too."

"Oh!" he said in mock surprise. "That's a very interesting suggestion. Thanks. Think I will, think I will."

"Roy, have you decided what you're going to do about the job? Or do you mind my asking?"

"No, no, not at all—principally because there's no an-

swer. I—er—have to talk to them first, Eleanor. Clear up some points.”

The moment came to telephone New Gilead. When she placed the call, when she said the words, she felt as if she had reached out into the dark and caught hold of the hand of a friend.

Aunt Julia was surprised, happily surprised, and so was louder than ever. Eleanor was well able to hear her while holding the receiver six inches from her ear. And as her aunt spoke, she thought: She's there sitting in our house. Either next to the drop-leaf table in the hall or the piecrust table at the head of the stairs. One or the other. She's there.

When Eleanor explained where she was and that she would be home next day with a guest or two, Aunt Julia merely replied that she'd be delighted to see them all. She put no prying questions. But Eleanor could tell that her aunt was cheered at hearing from her and by what she thought was her altered tone. At last Aunt Julia said, “You sound much better, dear. I'm so relieved. And so anxious to see you.”

“I'm anxious to see you.” And I'm relieved too. “Aunt Julia,” she said, “I want to ask you something silly. Are you upstairs right now or down?”

“Downstairs, dear. Why?”

“Oh, no reason really.” The drop-leaf table. With the water color above it which Mary Cassatt had given her father.

Tod said good-bye to them at the hotel. “Be a lot of sharpies around the station. Lot of 'em coming in to ride the funeral train today. I might just as well not draw attention to you.” He shook hands with Roy, who still bore a scratch on his temple and, although he had discarded his cane, still limped a little. “Adieu, doctor,” Tod said, glanc-

ing at the scratch. "I am glad you are on the mend. I am also glad to have met you."

"Well, Tod," grinned Roy, "I'd have to tot up the debits and credits, but on the whole I guess I'm glad I met you."

Eleanor put her hand in Tod's paw. "Good-bye, Tod. I can't help thanking you. For what you're going to do."

He chuckled in slow, soft, separated explosions. "You are a great kidder, kid. Thanking me for saving my own neck. A great kidder. Bon voyage."

He turned to Victor West. "Well, professor," he said, still chuckling, "even the worst of friends must part, eh?"

West smiled, then held out his hand. "So long, Tod. I don't look to see you again. Wish you luck."

"Yes," said Tod, the chuckle fading, "I will bet you really do. Thanks, Vic. Same to you."

"You won't forget to bury me?"

Tod smiled again and tapped his breast pocket. "Got it all here. I won't forget. After all, I am the guy who wrote Seastrom's life. I would not go and forget the final chapter."

At the door Roy called "Regards to Alabam."

Tod waved.

Back, the train pounded back, curving up across the east toward home. Roy sat next to her and Victor West sat opposite. So short a time, so few weeks, and now she was on her way back with a man who had been only a split-second memory when she left and yet who had helped her to return. Back to the town whose air was heavy with her guilt, back to ignite a flame which would set the guilt, now invisible in that air, blazing for all to see.

"Everything O.K.?" asked Roy.

"Of course." She tried to sink back comfortably.

Soon she noticed that West was looking at her, almost staring. At first, in an instinctive reaction, she averted her

eyes. Then she turned back; he was still looking at her, smiling affably. I wonder what he thinks of me, she thought. I know he thinks that I understand what he tried to do. But that was all—him. I wonder what he thinks of me. I wonder whether, besides that understanding, he likes me. Or whether he thinks I'm cracked and intrusive. . . .

Then she was ashamed for wondering about this, as if personal feelings were indecorous and out of place.

I suppose he wonders *why*, she thought. What it is I have to do. Well, he'll soon see. We'll all soon see. She shivered secretly, part eagerness and (healthily, she thought) part fear. West held out his cigarettes to her and she was pleased to observe that his hand was shaking a bit too.

Roy left them in New York. He said that he expected to settle his business in a day and that he'd come up to New Gilead the following afternoon. She gave him her address.

"It's up the hill from the station," she said. "You can get a taxi, but it's not much of a walk and it isn't hard to find."

"I'd find it even if it was." He wanted to kiss her but he didn't think she'd like it in front of West, so he shook hands. "So long, Victor," he said. "Take care of each other."

"So long, Roy," smiled West. "We'll do our best. See you tomorrow."

As they watched Roy follow his porter across the station floor, West said, "Look at the way he walks. Even with that little limp, look at his step. How old is he, do you know?"

"Thirty-two."

He frowned. "I'm only thirty-seven."

This hadn't occurred to her but it was true, of course; he had been only in his very early twenties at the time of the flight. She had somehow thought of him as indeterminate aged and ageless.

She was glad of this reference to himself because she hoped it would serve as an opening for a few questions during the ride up to Connecticut. But, although he wasn't evasive, he was impatient.

"Oh, hell, I don't want to talk about me," he said gently. "For one thing, I don't know much about me right now. Tell me about the place we're going to. Your house, your family. It's a big house, you said. Are you rich?"

"Well-to-do," she admitted, laughing. "You'll meet my Aunt Julia. I think you'll like her."

"How's she going to feel about you bringing me home?"

"She expects you. I told her on the phone. She said she'd be glad to meet you."

"Funny. Last thing I expected these days was to be somebody's guest. In a big Connecticut house." He smiled. "Guess we changed each other's life a little."

She said soberly, "I hope that—I hope it—" And didn't finish.

"Well," he said after a moment, "no use second-guessing ourselves. We've taken the plunge." He paused. "Roy said yesterday one of the good things in his scheme would be about the future. You know, I'd almost forgotten that damned word."

As it turned out, Aunt Julia was somewhat puzzled by West but she liked him. After she had hugged her niece silently for a moment and then kissed her cheek, she turned to him with the "whom-have-we-here" look which Eleanor knew so well. But he returned that look with only a kind of frank presentation of his face and her expression quailed slightly before this lack of even mild opposition. She put out her hand and in her vigorous voice said, "I'm happy to meet you, Mr. West, and to have you here."

Later after he had gone upstairs, her aunt said, "Nelly, have you known Mr. West long?"

Eleanor considered the question, then said, "I can't answer that in one sentence, dear. Yes and no."

"Strange face. Three or four faces in one. But simple too. How'd he get that little scar along his cheek, do you know?"

"Motor accident, I think," replied Eleanor.

And then she was in her room, at last alone, home. This room, now pretty in the sun, where the universe had withered into ashes. So much had happened to her, she had lost and gained so much since then, traded time for strength; yet here unchanged were the same cool walls, the same desk, bed, chairs. How could that be?

She had felt this, too, when she got off the train, although under Victor's eye she hadn't allowed herself to appear surprised. The long tobacco-brown station shed, the shiny hedge across the road, the giant parking-lot tree, all there still, unaltered, unmoved. Unaffected by the fact that for days (ages) she had been unable to remember them. They stood there unaware that for chasms of time they had ceased to exist, that they had returned to her now like a magician's world out of thin air, summoned by the abracadabra of her presence.

She walked to the window of her room and drew the curtain aside. She tried to fool a part of herself by pretending that she had gone absently to the window, to look out idly. But her eyes moved too quickly, they went up almost at once to the hills beyond the town. On the other side of those hills stood his house. And here below—lowering her gaze only a fraction of an inch but traveling a dozen miles and a thousand leagues of feeling—here was the town to which she was going to show herself naked. The town in which she was going to claim her place by setting herself apart from it.

She had paid the price for thinking again of Ralph, the

icicle stab, and having paid it meant to think of him a little longer. She wondered whether it was shameful that along with the horror and compassion and pain she had begun to feel faintly glad of his death. Since he'd had to die, since his death was now a fact, she didn't entirely regret it. She remembered what Seastrom had said about keeping the clergyman's letter; he had wanted it, to hurt him. There began to be a pleasure in the pain, particularly when she remembered what it had been the cause of in her life.

At dinner she talked of Mexico and how much she had enjoyed the little she had seen. Aunt Julia listened avidly, pouncing in her usual manner on gobbets of information like a hawk on rabbits. She asked Victor West whether he knew Mexico and he replied that he had traveled there a good deal. She said, "And you met Nelly in Pennsylvania?"

"That's right, Miss Shafer."

She considered this a moment, then said, "May I help you to more aspic?"

In the drawing room, while they were having coffee, Aunt Julia said, "By the way, Nelly, you haven't asked how things are going with the Memorial Center."

"No," replied Eleanor quietly, "that's right, I haven't, yet."

"The Town Commission met yesterday. They voted to accept Van Nuys's affidavit as proof of Mr. Digby's wishes. Of course they had precious little choice. They either had to accept Van Nuys's word or publicly rebuff one of their members. So they've given the award to this man Hayes. The contracts are being drawn up."

"I see." She glanced at West. He was leaning back, studying some book titles on the shelf behind him. You ought to listen, she thought, this is the matter which indirectly changed your life.

Aunt Julia went on: "I met Van Nuys on the street today. He took great pains to assure me that Hayes's design

would make a fine memorial. Although I hadn't expressed any doubt on the subject."

Later, after Aunt Julia had gone to her room, she and West strolled down to the end of the garden, past her father's little studio-house. "I was poking around in the library just before," he said. "I found out who your father was. Wendell Shafer."

"Yes, I know." She smiled at her involuntary reply. "That—that Memorial Center Aunt Julia mentioned before, that's being erected in his honor."

He nodded, his hands in his pockets, and watched his feet scuff the gravel as they walked.

She thought, Now? Ought I to tell him about it? Or ought I to start it first? Is it possible that he might try to dissuade me? . . . Frightening. Like a child strangled in the process of being born.

Anyway, it doesn't need to be talked about, she thought, it needs to be done. He'll know what it is when it happens.

"Eleanor," he said, "I've been thinking. Maybe I shouldn't have come here. Maybe I ought to move along. I mean, what the hell, I made up my own mind. You don't have to prove anything. I mean . . ."

"That's not true," she said. "You know it isn't."

"Well," he shrugged, "I almost feel like . . . like a bill collector or something. You don't have to . . ."

She put her hand on his arm, she touched him there in the dark in his badly cut blue suit. "I need you to be here. I'm not very strong yet. I need—proof. A reservoir. Just for a little while, please. I don't feel that you're standing over me, don't think that, it isn't true. But knowing that you're here—well, in more ways than one, it's as if I hadn't come back alone."

After a moment he said, "O.K. I'll stay awhile . . . if it's really any use. I just don't want to be—to be—"

"You're not. You're *with* me."

". . . If that's the way things are, sure. It's just that—well, after dinner there, while we were sitting around talking, I thought you looked kind of—strained. And I just wondered—"

"Not because of you. Quite the reverse."

He was quiet for a time. "Well, whatever the trouble is, every day you stay alive is that much more of a grip on it, right? I mean, if it doesn't kill you straight off, then just staying alive puts you ahead. Right? Every day counts."

"One more spoonful, just to spite the graveyard," she said.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Something I— Nothing."

Soon he excused himself, saying he was tired, and she wished him a good night's rest. She smoked another cigarette there in the garden and quite calmly decided that she would start tomorrow. She marveled at how coolly she tossed her cigarette away and stepped on it and walked to the house just as if she'd decided to wear blue tomorrow instead of green, as if she weren't at the end of everything that had filled the furthest corners of her life up to now.

As she passed her aunt's room, she noticed light under the door. When she got to her own room, she halted before she went in.

Aunt Julia lived in New Gilead too, her father's sister, she would suffer by this too. She ought at least to be warned. And, thought Eleanor, if I'm going to have to tell the story, the whole story (like pulling the raw flesh from her body), I might as well begin with someone who loves me.

She went back to her aunt's door and knocked softly. "Come in, dear," called Aunt Julia.

She was propped up in bed, reading. Her cane, like a frontiersman's rifle, stood near-by ready for action.

"Are you sleepy, Aunt Julia?"

"No, dear, not at all. I've been reading later and later these past nights. Haven't been able to sleep well for weeks. Rarely turn out my light before three."

I know why, thought Eleanor. "I'd like to talk to you, if I may."

"Don't be silly, of course you may. Come sit down."

"Thank you." She sat in the low rocker near the bed. "I want to tell you—some things."

"Good. Fine." Aunt Julia put a bookmark in her place and closed the book decisively. "There's lots I'd like to know. But I had to wait."

Eleanor nodded, a little too numb even to show appreciation of her aunt's patience.

After a moment of silence in which she studied her, Aunt Julia spoke up. "Before you begin, I only want to say one thing. Nelly, this is your home and I'm your aunt. I am, I hope, more than just your aunt."

Eleanor pressed her lips together over a mouth achingly dry, and blinked.

"Now," said her aunt, "proceed."

She took one last look at Aunt Julia as she was now. Before the words began, before she knew. In case there was a difference after.

Then she began at the beginning and kept straight on, omitting only trivial details, speaking with a strength which seemed, as she progressed, to grow out of her very ability to utter these things at all, a kind of self-invigorating strength.

When she finished, the voice that came out of her aunt was the quietest she'd heard her use in years. It wasn't merely softer, it was weakened.

"Eleanor," began Aunt Julia tentatively, "dear, I—I feel very helpless. Very strange."

Eleanor nodded. "You're shocked."

"No," her aunt replied quickly, "I'm only glad you didn't ask my help then—before you went away. I wouldn't have known what to do or say."

"I wouldn't have known what to ask."

"But you—you seemed to have threshed it out."

"Not yet. I only know that I'm going to."

Aunt Julia was about to say something, then reconsidered. After a moment, she shook her head. "Poor Ralph."

"Yes," agreed Eleanor, "he's the only one to be pitied. Not Victor West certainly, who's the best off of all. And not me."

"Still—how dreadful it must have been for you those first days. I supposed even then it might be more than friendship, but I couldn't say anything. How dreadful it must have been, Nelly."

"Well, it's past now. Because I have some place to go."

Aunt Julia seemed now to revert to the subject she had postponed a moment before. At any event, the same half-swallowing expression returned to her face. "You're—determined, Eleanor?"

"That's what I came home for. That's what gave me the strength to come home."

"You know what's going to happen? You know what's going to be brought out? Yes," she continued at once, "I see that you know very well."

"I don't care what happens. Oh, I care, of course. I'm frightened, just as frightened as I would have been two or three weeks ago. But besides that, I *don't* care too. I almost want it to happen. And that's what's new."

"Nelly," said Aunt Julia, her mouth strangely and uncharacteristically indecisive, "I don't want you to hate me. I don't even really want to interfere. I just want to help you, the best way I possibly can."

"I know, Aunt Julia."

"Then you know what—what I'm going to say."

"Nelly," her eyes clouded slightly, "you won't be able to stand it. All the—well, all of them knowing. It was hard enough for you to tell me. But when they *all* know—"

"Maybe I won't be able to stand it. But, Aunt Julia, that's what I've found out—that that's what doesn't matter. What matters is—what has to be done. And I've known what that was from the moment I got your letter. Now—I think—I can do it."

Suddenly Aunt Julia turned her head away and Eleanor knew that she was crying, a thing she had never seen her aunt do for herself. Eleanor felt a flood of love and sympathy run through her but beneath it was something steady and unmoved. Queer. She wondered whether this new tenacity of hers was damaging her affections; or whether it was simply that she had known all along that her actions would run counter to the wishes of many people and that unconsciously she had been braced and ready.

"Aunt Julia," she said, "I know it's going to be terrible for you too. Almost as bad as for me. Maybe worse. Because you won't be gaining anything from it."

"It isn't that," her aunt's head was still turned away, her mouth still fluttery. "I won't say it doesn't matter, but it really isn't that. I—I suppose I'm getting foolish in my dotage; this—this is just a kind of delayed reaction—"

"You *are* shocked," said Eleanor.

Aunt Julia didn't answer. She lay there awhile, her face screwed up almost ludicrously; then she got her handkerchief from under the pillow, dabbed behind her glasses, and blew her nose. She turned to Eleanor again. "That was a lot of use, wasn't it? Now where were we?"

"I was saying that I thought it would be awful for you too."

"Well, I—I'm a fairly tough old bird. At least I've always pretended to be. Now I'll have to make good or stop pretending. Though I couldn't truthfully predict right now

which it will be. But," she said kindly, "there's something else—someone else. There's—well, the whole thing started out of a memorial to your father."

Eleanor nodded, not at that fact but in recognition of the unspoken deductions appended to it. "Yes. That's what I told myself at first, that I had no right to—to muddy up his name . . . or at any rate, our name. But that's not an argument, Aunt Julia, it's an escape. He's dead; I'm here. What would he think of me—never mind what the town and the others will think—what would he think if I were to hide behind the fact that I happen to have his name? Aunt Julia, I think Father loved me very much. But lately, looking back, I've seen that he never respected me very much. I—I was a kind of pet. That was both our faults, I guess. But I'm the only one who can do anything about it now. No," she shook her head, "that wouldn't be love and respect, to keep quiet for his sake. It's a way out. He wouldn't like it."

"The town won't agree with that, Nelly. And you say the town is so important to you. You say coming back here meant so much. How will you be able to live here—after?"

"I have to take my chance of that. I can't consider it now. New Gilead's a good deal more to me than my home. You know that. But worrying about that now would be beside the point. As much as anything else in the world, I've been wanting to come back here. But I certainly couldn't stay here if I kept quiet. I—I simply couldn't. My way—speaking out—there's at least a chance."

Aunt Julia looked thoughtful. "Well, then," she said tentatively, "There's Mrs. Digby. I suppose she doesn't know about—you. It'll be a blow to her."

"Possibly. I don't think so. It will only irk her." She shook her head with some anger. "Anyway, she didn't care much for Ralph alive. How can I care for her, now that he's dead and his last wishes are at stake?"

Her aunt's eyebrows contracted in worried acquiescence, and then she looked thoughtful again.

"No, Aunt Julia," said Eleanor kindly, "no, dear, don't think of anything else. As you say, I'm—determined." Tasting the word.

And now Aunt Julia assented, not really agreeing, still desirous of dissuading her, but ashamed to take too firm a stand against the kind of courage she had always thought she had herself. And that was the next thing she said. "Well, Nelly, I like to think I'm fearless and brave. But in all God's eternity I couldn't do it."

It was strange to Eleanor to see her aunt's face so tremulous and wavery. It gave her a silly proud thrill to think that she had been capable of an action so iron as to produce that effect. "Well, it's been made easier for me. I have the profit of someone else's experience." He was sleeping, three doors down the hall, but in this first encounter the knowledge of him had been like a wall at her back.

Aunt Julia made no comment on this. She looked at her awhile, then asked, "How do you intend to begin, Nelly? What are you going to do?"

"I thought that tomorrow I'd write to Mayor Dell—as head of the Commission—and tell him that I have some facts about the memorial award that I'd like to place before him. I'll have to act quickly, before they sign the contracts with this Hayes man."

"Maybe the Commission could keep it to themselves," said her aunt eagerly. "Maybe they could handle the matter in council and no one need ever know."

"Maybe. I hope so. But I don't look for a thing of this kind to be kept secret."

"Well, but . . . Nelly, I have an idea," she said suddenly, almost imploringly. "May I make one suggestion? May I? Please? I know that you feel you're doing the right thing

but all this has come so quickly and I—I *don't* want to interfere, but Nelly darling—”

She took her aunt's hand. “Yes, of course. What's the suggestion?”

“Couldn't—couldn't you see Van Nuys privately first? Tell him you know the—the truth of the matter. Perhaps you could persuade him to withdraw his affidavit now and save himself public disgrace. That way you could achieve what you want and still avoid—everything else.”

Eleanor considered it soberly. “All right. I have no particular desire to be a martyr. Or—or to hurt people.” She didn't say “hurt you” because she knew it was too late. She doubted that anything would come of this suggestion but at least she owed her aunt the knowledge that everything else had been tried first. “I'll see him tomorrow.”

After she said good night, she looked back from the door and saw that at last her vigorous aunt was old. “Aunt Julia,” she said, “I know you don't believe it now, but someday you'll be able to love me again. Exactly as you did—before tonight.”

The old lady under the bed lamp looked up at her, her eyes clouding once more, and moved her lips a couple of times but couldn't honestly say anything.

Eleanor called Van Nuys's office early in the morning. He wasn't in, but his secretary made an appointment for her at two o'clock.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Van Nuys was pleased when his secretary told him that Miss Shafer was coming. He knew that she had been away and supposed that she was curious to know more about the winning design for her father's memorial. Well, fine. He had a photostat of it right in his desk; he'd enjoy showing it to her and discussing the project. It occurred to him that she might have gone to Mayor Dell instead, but she'd probably heard about the affidavit and thought that, since he'd spoken last to Digby, he would be the best source of information. As he was, as he undoubtedly was.

He knew Miss Shafer only slightly and, except for her gray eyes, had forgotten what she looked like. Pretty child, he thought as she came in; he was feeling broad and benevolent.

Van Nuys prided himself on certain clevernesses, and he quickly judged that it would be better not to offer his hand. After he had greeted her, he showed her to the leather-covered armchair opposite his desk. It crossed his mind—a mind that was like a sentry in a hostile country—that for the daughter of a famous man, a girl who must have moved

about considerably in society, she seemed curiously tense and ill at ease.

"I met your aunt on the street yesterday, Miss Shafer. She tells me you've been traveling. Mexico and so forth. A pleasant trip, I trust."

"Yes," she said. "Mr. Van Nuys, I've come to see you about the winning design for the Center."

He didn't let her abruptness shake him. Great man's daughter. Spoiled, probably. Crotchety. Matter of fact, he had heard that she wrote poetry.

"Aha," he said genially, "I suppose so, Miss Shafer. I supposed that was your reason for honoring me."

"You did?"

"Yep. And—no sooner said than done. I have a copy of the design right here." He reached down to open the drawer next to him, enjoying the luxury of the cozy movement.

"Thank you, but I don't want to see it."

"Oh? Have you seen it already? The mayor show it to you?"

"No, I haven't been to the mayor yet."

He smiled. "Well, perhaps I'd better not try to anticipate you. Perhaps I'd better let you tell me what I can do for you."

"Yes. I'll come right to the point."

What in God's name was she so tense about? he wondered.

"Mr. Van Nuys," she said, "you swore out an affidavit saying that Ralph Digby told you he'd chosen Hayes's design."

Hm? What was that for? And why was her voice quavering a little—as if she'd keyed herself up to something?

"Exactly, Miss Shafer." With electric speed, he reviewed his story. Airtight. What was she getting at? With

an upward inflection he invited her to question him further. "Exactly."

"Mr. Van Nuys, I'm the one person in the world who knows that your affidavit is a lie."

It was so sudden that he didn't have a chance to muster the indignation that he thought always looked better at a moment like this. However, since he'd been startled anyway, he decided to play it breathlessly, for at least the first reaction. "What? What was that?"

"I think you understood. I said it was a lie."

Now he could switch, it would be perfectly logical. "Lie!" he exclaimed angrily, his eyes (he was sure) blazing. While he set his jaw firmly, messengers scurried to the borders of his remembrance, checking fortifications, moats, battlements. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand you," he said heavily yet coolly. "May I ask you to explain?"

"I mean that you lied," she replied simply. "Mr. Digby never said that."

She sat facing him directly with her feet together and her hands in her lap. She looked like a kid who'd made up her mind to defy Teacher and was trying to keep as calm as possible while doing it. As he pulled himself erect in his chair, he felt his jowls spread out slightly on either side of his face and was glad of them. He could use every bit of impressiveness he could command. "Miss Shafer, I presume that you think you have a reason for this remarkable statement, but will you kindly—"

"You lied, Mr. Van Nuys. That's all, you lied. He never said it."

He halted. He stared at her. He had meant to sit rigidly motionless, but he noticed that his fingers were drumming on the desk-top. Well, he couldn't stop now—it would be a concession. So he adopted the drumming into his characterization and made believe that he had intended to drum. He wasn't frightened. He insisted on that. Only a child or an

idiot would expect everything in a venture like this to be clear sailing; he wasn't frightened. On the other hand, this girl wasn't insane; she must have had a reason for deliberately coming here and starting all this. That's what he had to find out—her reason. And the quickest way to find it, and take care of it, would be to cease denial—without admitting a thing. Play her along a bit on the string.

He struck a different note, the ironical upper hand, still deeply angry but with a faintly amused tone around the edges. "How do you know, Miss Shafer? How can you possibly know? What makes you so positive of this amazing assertion?"

"I was there that night."

. . . *Was* she indeed? There's a bit of news, Henry me lad. But take it easy. Keep it inside; that's what you've got an outside for.

Besides, she only *says* she was there. Your Aunt Tillie's uncle could walk in and say that. Maybe it's only a little game she's trying here. . . . No, not likely. What for? But still she didn't say she was there *with* anyone. It's still one against one.

"Really, Miss Shafer? May I say that I didn't see you?"

"I was upstairs. And I heard the whole discussion."

"If that's true—if, I say—then you heard exactly what I stated in the affidavit," he nodded firmly.

"No, Mr. Van Nuys. I remember what I heard. I remember exactly. 'The entire fee that's paid to Hayes could find its cute little way back to you and me.'"

He stopped drumming.

"I remember something else," she said. "Something Mr. Digby said. 'I'll write to the Commission first thing tomorrow to tell them that my choice is Harry Norris.' And then—there were some angry things."

Smacko. Right on the button. She'd been there, all right. The one thing he'd thought he was sure of: that there

were no witnesses. . . . Well, don't get panicky, Henry boy. Now's the time for coolness, generalship. You're supposed to be such a goddam wonderful planner, now's the chance to prove it. Let's see you do something. Let's see you put that big gorgeous brain of yours to work. Coolly and precisely.

First thing. Make sure she's the only one. Don't want anyone *else* popping out of closets. "I presume that you can produce witnesses, Miss Shafer."

"No. I was alone."

"Then you realize," he said in a voice freighted with barely suppressed indignation, "that—unsupported—you are making a most grave and serious charge."

"Yes."

"Perjury. Misconduct in office. Taking of bribes. *And* attempted bribery."

He laughed shortly. "Everything but kidnaping and arson." He pushed out a little cynical smile. "May I ask, Miss Shafer, why—if you believe I'm such a wicked, wicked man—may I ask why you didn't say so two weeks ago? Why didn't you come forward then with"—he almost said "the truth"—"these allegations?"

"I . . . was ill. I had to go away."

"I see!" he said thunderingly, as if he'd scored a great point when he merely hoped to use the echo of the thunder to give him a chance to think. A bit of reorganization was what was wanted here, and damned quickly—all the way down the line. . . . Damn it, this little girl!

To retain the upper hand he had to keep on talking. And since he hadn't yet thought of anything new to carry matters forward, he'd recapitulate, play around with a few stock phrases and ideas, give himself a breathing spell . . .

"Well, Miss Shafer," he laughed again, again shortly, "let's see how matters stand. You walk into my office, cool as a cucumber, and in less than five minutes you accuse me of half a dozen crimes. Ordinarily I'd have known how to

handle such a situation. But—considering who you are—I'm willing to listen patiently. If it were anyone else, I'd have sent for the police by now."

"Would you, Mr. Van Nuys?"

Heartily. "I would, indeed. But since I've been willing to hear you out, be good enough to let me explain something to you. I swore out an affidavit, attesting certain facts. You assert that these facts are untrue. I presume you are willing to contest that affidavit officially."

"Yes."

"Miss Shafer, you're a young lady well esteemed in this community—on your own account, in addition to the fact that you're the daughter of this town's greatest son. His name and your reputation would go far. But I may say—I'm proud to say—my fellow townsmen think fairly well of me too. If anything of what you've just said were hinted beyond this door, my fellow townsmen—I may say a jury of my fellow townsmen—would weigh my statements equally with yours. No one goes further than I in admiration for your father, but I—"

"Mr. Van Nuys," she said politely, "you're wasting your breath. The affidavit was a lie."

Calm. Determined, damn her. *Determined*. There's the hook we're looking for, Henry! Determined to do what? *Why* is she telling me all this? She didn't just casually drop by to let me know she knew. And if she were merely looking to make trouble, she'd have gone straight to the mayor. Is there—is it possible—is there a deal in the wind? Not impossible. Stranger things have happened—as you well know. Be smooth, me lad, be competent. Handle her the way a doctor would treat a very sick patient. . . . "Now suppose we get to the point, Miss Shafer, shall we? What's the purpose of this visit? If you believe what you say, why did you come to me instead of going to Mayor Dell or the police?"

"I wanted to give you a chance."

"Chance for what?" . . . Aha, aha, here it comes. . . .

"A chance to retract before I expose you. A chance to withdraw your affidavit."

. . . Those were the words, all right. For a split second he thought there'd been a gap in his hearing, that the words had come from his imagination. But she'd said them, all right. The proof of it was the look on her face.

There *was* no deal. It was a little depressing. She had no ax to grind. A young fanatic.

Airily. Better make it airily until you get some ground under your feet. "I see. And that's absolutely all?"

"That's all."

He couldn't find anything to reply immediately, so he smiled, a long, knowingful smile.

She had the advantage, damn her. Even if it was only her word against his. With her name. And a woman; they always tended to believe women against men. Just as they always tended to distrust men in public office—even part-time public office. And if they really started to scratch around Hayes . . . and that holding company . . .

"My dear Miss Shafer. My dear young Miss Shafer. You must realize that you're being a trifle silly. Why, even if there were a grain of truth in your charges—which I flatly and unequivocally deny—it would be tantamount to admitting complete guilt for me to withdraw my affidavit."

"Well," she replied carefully, almost sympathetically, "I've thought of that, Mr. Van Nuys. And I think I've discovered a way for you to withdraw without a great deal of damage. You could tell the truth to Mayor Dell and he could pledge the rest of the Commission to secrecy, before he told them. They might be willing to keep the secret if they thought you'd had a change of heart. Then, publicly, they could decide that they don't like Hayes's design after all. Even if it were Mr. Digby's choice, they have that right.

They could pick Norris and you could resign from the Commission. Everyone would think it was because you disagreed about the design."

He laughed, loud and long, wishing that he had something to laugh at.

Short hair, Henry me lad. That's where she's got you. The whole thing was a risk, but a carefully calculated one. It looked damned good. You thought you had the Commission by the short hair—they had to accept your affidavit or call you a liar. And now this pipsqueak . . .

He shook his head. "Really, Miss Shafer, I don't know why this whole conversation doesn't make me very angry. Very, very angry indeed. Probably because I think you're somewhat upset, not quite yourself."

He tried hard to assume an expression which would logically allow him to get up and walk to the near-by window. He had to get his face out of her sight for a few moments so that he could concentrate on thinking, without worrying about how he looked. . . .

"Don't be frightened, Mr. Van Nuys," she said behind him. "I'll do what I can to help you."

His back to her, he laughed and shook his head again. He looked out the window. The town street, with the shops in buildings of the same colonial design, was the usual snug bustling scene on which he was wont to look down with pride and a sense, almost, of ownership. But now there was no comfort in it. His eyes flitted about unhappily as he feverishly ran the fabric of this girl's story through his mind. Feeling it, feeling for a flaw. Anything.

She had been there, God knows. And she could probably prove it. Anyway, they'd take her word against his. If she only created suspicion, that would be bad enough. If she only said that she had been there and heard—

Wait a minute! She had been there, had she? Upstairs. *Why* upstairs? Why hadn't she come down? Why hadn't she

been willing that night to let anyone else know that she was there? Why hadn't Digby even mentioned that he had a guest before they started their discussion? *Why?*

A tiny little chuckle of warmth began deep in the desert inside of him and silently spiraled up. He'd suspected all along that there was something . . .

He turned back calmly.

"Miss Shafer," he said easily, "so far, in this little talk, I've been bearing the brunt of—what I'll have to call the attack. You've said some challenging things and you've reached some drastic conclusions. Now if I may, *I'd* like to ask a question or two."

After a second's pause, she returned his look with what seemed to him something close to resignation. "All right."

"Miss Shafer, you say you were at Digby's house that night. Upstairs. But I remember distinctly—quite distinctly because I made sure before I went in—there were no lights on anywhere else in the house."

"That's right," she said. "The lights were off."

"Mm-hm." He bit his lower lip cautiously. "You were upstairs in a darkened room."

"Yes."

"Mm-hm. And I didn't see any other car. Surely you didn't walk all the way up that long hill?"

"My car was in the garage."

"In the garage, with the doors closed, on a clear summer night. Mm-hm. Let's see now. You're upstairs in a dark room. Your car's in a closed garage." He came back to the desk. "Miss Shafer, if you pressed your accusations against me and there was a hearing, do you know what construction would be put on those two facts?" Evidently she wasn't going to answer; he was willing to oblige. "It would be thought that you were hiding."

"Yes," she said in a moment, "I suppose so."

Why, this was gravy. This was taking candy from a baby

. . . The girl was beginning to smile faintly. Embarrassment or an attempt at nonchalance? Or hopelessness?

Why hadn't he thought of this before? Of *course* that's why she was up there. A little hanky-panky. All those artists were alike.

What a damned fool he'd been to get jittery. This poor kid had walked right in here and tied a gag around her own mouth. Never thought he'd suspect. Maybe she thought he'd be too much of a gentleman to say anything even if he did suspect. She had another think coming.

"Now I'm going to be brutally frank, Miss Shafer. This isn't pleasant, I know, but you must admit that you have forced me." He put his hands in his coat pockets, thumbs extended, and leaned forward from the hips like an uncle telling her something for her own good. "Mr. Digby received me that night in his dressing gown and pajamas. It was past ten o'clock. In a lonely, otherwise deserted house. You were hiding in a room upstairs when I came . . . I won't pursue the subject, but you know the construction which would be put on that, Miss Shafer."

Nothing to say *now*, have you? Joan of Arc has fallen flat on her face. Came in here to play the heroine, to make sure no one put anything over on your sweetie now that he's dead, but you didn't know the man you were trying to buffalo, did you, cutie?

"Yes," he nodded gravely, "we both know what malicious gossipers would think. And would say. There's really no need to dwell on the matter." He straightened up, then raised his eyebrows in perfect friendliness. "Now, in view of all aspects of the situation, I think we had better consider the subject closed, eh, Miss Shafer? Your version of the conversation differs from mine—although I still do not concede a thing. But whatever your version, it's impossible for you to put it forward without—er—well, let's forget the whole affair, shall we? Both of us."

She hesitated only briefly. "There isn't much time, Mr. Van Nuys," she said, now quite at ease. "I'll give you until tomorrow. Six o'clock tomorrow night. If I don't hear from you by then that you'll retract, I'll mail a letter to Mayor Dell."

He frowned in surprise. Anger spurted up within him and since he had nothing to lose anyway, he let it ride. "All *right*, little girl," he slammed the desk, "if that's the way you want it! The gloves are off!" He pointed a thick finger at her. "I warn you. Solemnly. Soberly. With all the serious intent in the world. If you make any further trouble about this, if you utter one word, I'll see that every detail about this case is dragged out and put on exhibition. If you want to start slinging mud, why, we'll just find out who can sling more of it. I'll see that you're covered from head to foot. I'll see that—if I suffer any embarrassment through this—by God, you and your high and mighty family will have to leave town before me." He nodded sharply. "And you can rely on me to do it."

"I do," she said. "I believe you." She rose. "By six o'clock tomorrow, Mr. Van Nuys."

His eyes felt like two hot coins in his head. He laughed and heard his laugh come out rather high. "You're bluffing. You'll never do it. You have a good deal more at stake than I have, Miss Shafer. Your own reputation. Your father's memory. Your aunt's position. Oh," he brushed it aside impossibly, "you wouldn't do it. For what reason?"

"Unless," he said, "this other architect, Norris, is another—friend of yours?" She reddened. He shrugged elaborately innocently. "Well, isn't that the kind of thing people would say?"

She nodded, still red. "It—it's probably a good sample."

"You bet it is. You just bet your little boots it is. And that's why I call your bluff, Miss Shafer. I don't believe you'll do it. You couldn't take the consequences. You

couldn't *possibly*. Among other reasons, there isn't nearly enough at stake for you."

He saw her almost answer that, then change her mind.

"And that's what I intend to bank on," he added warmly.

"Well," she said, "until six o'clock tomorrow."

He smiled and got up. "Yes, yes," he nodded confidently. "However, just to reassure you, if you should decide otherwise, you can depend on our little conversation here never passing that door."

"Good day, Mr. Van Nuys," she said.

"Good day, Miss Shafer." He watched her go, feeling that he'd handled the whole thing rather well. Poor kid, trying to make an exit with a show of bravado. H'mph. Must have thought she was dealing with a boob. Of course it *had* been touch and go there for a while till he'd put his finger on the weak spot; but this was the end of it now.

On the whole, he was glad that she'd come. Glad to find out about it. Now he couldn't be surprised any more about this business. There were no unknown factors; it was really sealed up. Besides, never could tell when that juicy tidbit about her and Digby might come in handy.

As Eleanor went through the outer office, down the stairs and up the street, she had to exercise considerable will to keep from hurrying. She took great care to walk with her usual step. She wanted to run, not only because she felt already as if everyone were looking at her but because she also felt strangely exhilarated and refreshed.

So that's what it's like, she thought. And that's what it's going to be. Today was a fair foretaste. It was pretty much what I expected, only there's something else too. Along with all the slime, there's this—this release. Not pride—I hope not, it would be silly. A kind of unburdening, and I like it.

Well, she thought again, no need to be too pleased about it yet. It's all hardly begun.

But the exhilarated feeling persisted. It was the first thing Roy remarked about when he arrived. "What happened to you?" he asked. "You look different."

"How different?"

"Oh, I don't know. Slightly drunk. Been nipping?"

"No, but you're a clever fellow. You've always been a clever fellow. Come in and meet my aunt."

Aunt Julia had remained in her room all morning and had appeared only after lunch. Since then, she and Eleanor had made a deliberate point of not avoiding each other but they had talked little and hadn't sat together long. Now when she met Roy she smiled almost immediately. He often had that effect on people.

"So you're Roy Anderson," she said, shaking hands. "Eleanor is a very good describer."

"She certainly is," nodded Roy, and they laughed.

While Roy was upstairs showering, Eleanor told Aunt Julia what she obviously wanted to know: what had happened with Van Nuys.

When she had finished, Aunt Julia said quietly, "He got to the—the point rather quickly, didn't he?"

"Yes, though not so quickly as I expected. I could see him searching feverishly for something to fight me with and I was surprised that it took him so long. Maybe that's only because I'm so—so conscious of it. . . . Funny. His back was toward me when he thought of it, but I could see it spread through him. Happily, like a glow."

"And that's the way it stands now. Six o'clock."

"Yes. Either way I can't lose."

Aunt Julia took off her glasses and pinched her eye sockets, in by the nose. In a moment she looked up; and, nodding and putting her glasses back on, she said, "I guess you were right last night, Nelly. All I need is a little time.

I—I'm going to be with you, Nelly." She took her niece's hand. "Can you just give me a little time?"

She lifted her aunt's hand and held it against her cheek.

Before dinner she showed Roy around the house. She could tell by the fact that he didn't say much and that what he said was mostly "Geel!" or "Wow!" that he thought the house was beautiful. As they came back down the curving stairs, he whistled softly. "This whole house. It's one big heirloom. Why didn't somebody tell me I was knocking around Mexico with the feelthy reech?"

Then he said he'd like to see the garden, and as they started out it occurred to her that he hadn't mentioned anything of what had happened in New York. So she knew what had happened.

They found Victor West seated on a bench which encircled one of the sugar maples, poring over a copy of the *New Gilead Chronicle*. After he shook hands with Roy, he said to Eleanor, "Say, this is a nice paper they put out here."

"Yes, I like it, misprints and all. But then they were my first publishers. When I was eight. 'My Impressions of the Grand Canyon.'"

"This really is your home town, isn't it?" said Victor. "H'mph."

"And has been for a couple of hundred years," said Roy.

West said, "Wonder what it feels like to really come from a place that way."

"Yes, Eleanor," said Roy, "tell a couple of gypsies what it feels like."

"You love the place," she replied. "Or, I suppose, you could hate it; I can see that. I love it."

Victor squinted at her and said, "Mm-hm." Then he flicked the paper with his finger. "They even have a 'Help Wanted' column."

"What, you looking for a job already?" asked Roy. "You're supposed to be coasting for a while."

"Oh, just thought I'd give it a look. Besides, two days is a lot of coasting. Begins to feel like sliding."

They sat under the tree for a while in the pleasant afternoon light. Roy enjoyed the feeling of being a conspirator with this man, particularly in a scheme which he himself had suggested. He loved to be on the inside of things and he thought of the three of them sitting there as three adults who had prepared a surprise which would soon burst upon the children of the world.

He wondered about Eleanor: why underneath everything she said and did today she seemed faintly excited: whether it had anything to do with the matter that had been on her mind these past few weeks, the matter on which West's story seemed to have had some bearing. Without looking at them, he thought of the two sitting next to him and found he was a little jealous. Not only because of the way he felt about Eleanor but simply because he was tacitly and inevitably excluded from this chapter of the story; and he liked to be on the inside of everything.

After a time Eleanor said she supposed they were thirsty and Roy volunteered to mix drinks. She took him to the large closet off the drawing room which served as a bar and brought him a bucket of ice.

"Thanks," he said as he measured out the jiggers of rum. "He's quite a lad, that V. West, isn't he? Job hunting already. I figured he'd want to sit down awhile and think things over."

"Well, I guess he's one of those people who can't think unless they're busy. Too restless."

As he fixed the drinks he searched for a subject that would draw her to him and would keep her close and intimate. He wanted to breach the exclusion, the alliance between her and West which he had sensed and in which

he had no part. But more than that, he wanted to make her as sympathetic to him as possible in preparation for the matter he knew had to come up between them, and which he hoped she expected.

The one link between them that would serve, the one subject which only he and she shared, was the matter of his job. The news might not entirely please her, he suspected; but it was all he could think of with which to center her thoughts on him.

"Want to hear what happened today?" he asked, adding the lime juice.

"Yes, very much. Tell me, Roy."

"Well . . . as long as I was in New York I decided to stop in at the Peerless office on my way to the publishing place. The Peerless people practically fell all over me, glad hand and so forth, and they told the Coast by teletype that I was in the office. Well—"

"Yes?"

"Well, it seems that Nisber, my boss, has just been made a producer. And they offered me his old job, head of Story. They like my work and this idea for the aviation picture; and they think I saved them a lot of valuable time by finding out quickly that Seastrom is unavailable. At least, it seemed quick to them. And, to cut it short, they offered me six-fifty."

"That's fine, Roy," she said at once, "that's really fine."

He stirred the cocktails with extreme care. "After all, it's not as if I were an old man. It's like I told Pete, my friend at the publisher's. In a couple of years, or three or four, when I've really laid away enough to take care of me for a while, then I can come back and be high-minded. Without qualms or reservations."

"I see."

He finished mixing. He tapped the spoon three times

on the side of a glass and laid it down. "Well, anyway," he said slowly, "it was fun while it lasted."

In a moment he looked at her; she picked up one of the drinks and tasted it. "Very good. Just right."

"And I learned something from it all," he continued. "I found out that no one ever really knows what he'll do in a certain situation until he's actually in it. He may think he'd act a certain way—it may turn out that he does act that way—but he'll never really know until it actually turns up. Right there in black and white. On the teletype." He tasted one of the drinks. "A little less sugar, maybe." He laughed and looked at her, caught her gaze squarely so that he had to look back. "I can stay awhile, anyway, can't I? They told me I could have a few extra days off. May I stay?"

"Don't be silly, Roy." She put her arm through his and held it tightly. Since this feeling of communion had been his purpose in bringing up the subject, he felt that he had taken a risk and won.

"One very good reason you may stay," she said, "is that what you just said is true. Imagination—no matter how good it is—is no substitute; because then the consequences are imaginary too. It's got to—turn up on the teletype."

She developed a vaguely uneasy feeling about Roy that night; she discovered that something had obtruded itself into the easy friendship that had sprung up so quickly and strongly between them. There was a figurative pebble in the "old shoe" comfort she had grown to feel with him. So she was unaccountably a trifle relieved when she was able politely to retire.

But in her room there were no thoughts of Roy at all (once she almost went across the hall to visit Aunt Julia but decided against it); so when she came down and met him next morning, she suddenly remembered the slight

uneasiness of the previous evening and wondered whether it would recur.

"Morning, princess," he said. "You look as if you'd slumbered well."

She hadn't. She had read and lain awake most of the night, but it wasn't an entirely unhappy restlessness, it was exciting. Like the night before a trip when she was a child. From the moment she awoke, early in the gray light, she had begun to subtract the minutes and hours from six o'clock that night.

"Have you seen the morning paper?" asked Roy. He held it out to her, the New York paper. There was a box on the bottom of the front page. "Flier Reveals Heroism Was Fraud. Posthumous Letter Tells Facts of Seastrom's Flight." Then followed the story exactly as Tod had promised it. At the end of the piece, they quoted a South Carolina congressman who had been informed of the letter and called Seastrom's receipt of the special Congressional Medal "the cold-bloodedest piece of chicanery ever foisted on this great nation, which a confession does not excuse." He said he would ask Congress to pass a resolution rescinding the award and added that if Seastrom were still alive, he would have found technical charges on which to have the miscreant tried.

When she had finished it, Eleanor asked, "Where's Victor?"

"Out somewhere. The maid said he went for a walk. When I came down, the paper had already been opened . . . Incidentally, in the movie column today, Peerless announces that they're putting 'High Heroes' in the works immediately. Nisber is going to produce."

They were at breakfast when West returned. He had on his usual dark shirt and light tie. The shirt was a little tight but it only made his chest look more solid. He smiled when he came in, said good morning, and went directly

to the hot dishes on the sideboard as if according to plan.

Roy glanced at Eleanor behind his back, then said, "Pardon us for starting before you, Victor, but I've got a lot of eating to do. Got to make back all I've spent for food on this girl."

"Sure, I understand," laughed Victor and sat in his place with his plate. Eleanor thought he looked very manly and touching when he sat at table. The dishes clinked. At length he said, "I just thought I'd take a little walk before breakfast." Then, smiling shakily, he looked up at them.

"Sure," said Roy.

"Of course," said Eleanor.

Soon after breakfast West asked to be excused, saying that he had a couple of things he wanted to do; and left the house. Aunt Julia came downstairs shortly after, and (it seemed to Eleanor) with a view to keeping her mind occupied, she appropriated Roy and plied him with questions about Hollywood. So Eleanor was free to withdraw.

She spent the morning in her room, sitting quiet, reading a bit, touching things. She took out a lot of old boxes of papers, mementoes, programs, clippings, souvenirs—and spent a good deal of time sorting them, rediscovering them, taking hold of everything that certified her to herself. To make sure that it was she here today, she looked back toward the roots.

There was a clock in her room and she could feel it moving, racing when she glanced at it, crawling when she glanced away, grinding constantly at the interim between a fleeting "now" and six o'clock. She couldn't quite decide whether she wanted the hour to arrive or whether she wanted this feeling, dangling high in a silver web, to endure.

After lunch, Aunt Julia napped and, since Victor West hadn't yet returned, Eleanor was left with Roy.

"Well, Miss E., would you like to take a walk?" He

asked it with an innocence which he knew sounded false and which therefore he hoped would be accepted as a private joke.

"All right, Roy." His tone of voice brought back the faint feeling of uneasiness; but after all he was Roy and she would go with him. "There are some very nice walks around here."

They went up the street over the brow of the hill, past the war memorial and the firehouse, down to the river and out along the river road. The uneasiness wouldn't dissolve but it was forgotten under other things: the blazing progress of the hours, the unseen but vivid presences in the town, Ralph and Van Nuys and somewhere, busy somehow, the dark-shirted West.

As they walked and as he talked, she left him there and sought out West wherever he was, and took his hand; and without her asking a question, he gave her answers and understood and smiled the classic, self-mocking smile. It was cool with him; the shadow of his life hung over her and sheltered her. All doubts dropped away, and she was left only with excitement, the joy of rising to the challenge. Win or lose, at least the strength to win or lose.

. . . "Yes," she replied to Roy's question, "you can fish that stream. My father used to get pickerel."

On the riverbank, they sat under a tree. With her hands between her knees, she turned her back to him and leaned against his shoulder. He thought this indicated that she didn't want to kiss him yet.

He wondered what was on her mind and hoped it was himself, not the unknown matter that had been plaguing her. But he couldn't wait any longer; time would run out. Besides, maybe he could help her with this trouble of hers, whatever it was; she might be able to use more than West's symbolic aid. He'd love to share it, he'd love to be in anything with her, even considerable trouble.

They watched the stream for a while. Although it ran rapidly, it hardly seemed to be moving, as if it were trying to slip past unnoticed. No birds sang in the trees roundabout. A cicada buzzed. Far up on the road, out of sight, a construction gang worked and talked and laughed.

He hoped this was the right moment, but whether or not, he couldn't plot and plan any longer. He had to find out. In spoken words. "Eleanor," he said. "Eleanor, maybe you know what I'm going to say. I hope you do. All the better. I hope you expect it." He put his arm around her waist. "I love you. Eleanor, I want you to marry me and come to California and have lots of breakfasts with me on my terrace in the sun."

Now she knew what the uneasiness was. She *had* expected him to say this. It was what unconsciously she had been trying to avoid.

"Roy," she put her hand on his, "Roy dear . . ." She sat quite still.

After a moment in which his breath hurt, he said quietly, "But you don't turn around. You don't turn around so I can kiss you."

"No . . . Roy dear."

. . . And it was more than uneasiness. There was also a most unreasonable tinge of anger, as if Roy were seeking something that was already spoken for, as if he were intruding into something already settled. But surely that was idiotic. Why should she be even the slightest bit impatient with him? Why should she feel that he had no right to ask—indeed that he ought to have known he had no right? . . .

"It—it's just not—the same way with you. Is that it?" But he knew the answer. It seemed now that he'd known it for dreary ages.

"Roy, I can't say stupid things to you. Consoling things. How much I like you. How much I owe you. How dear

you are to me. No matter how nicely I say them, you won't like them."

"No," he said throatily, "I wouldn't. Right now I hate you. Right now I'd like to strangle you." He shrugged. "Only natural."

"Of course."

"Of course," he repeated, and looked at her beautiful dark hateful hair. In a moment he said, "Is—is there anything I could possibly do?"

She shook her head, unable to turn to him. "No, Roy dearest. It's not you. Don't—say things about yourself. You're—you're wonderful and dear. It's—nothing about you." Although, as she said it, she knew this wasn't true. . . .

"Well," he swallowed, "does it have anything to do with the—the matter you've never told me about?"

"No. If it were that, I'd tell you and you could decide and I don't think you'd change your mind. It's not that."

"Then it—it's just the simplest deadliest reason." She didn't answer. She was still holding his hand. "Christ, it would be a lot simpler if you just hated me."

"Oh, Roy!" she exclaimed tearfully and put her cheek against his.

He grabbed her swiftly and held her close. A little later he said in her ear, "All right for you. You'll be 'sorry. When I'm the biggest man in pictures, don't say you didn't have your chance."

She laughed, still crying a bit, laughing and at the same time grateful to him for giving her the opportunity to laugh, for finishing this, as he finished almost everything, with a joke.

It was cruel, she knew, but as they walked home later she forgot him—her thoughts went back to the hour and the occasion. She knew she ought to stay with him in all her mind, that the least she owed him this afternoon was

all the immediacy she possessed. But like a drunkard toward drink, her thoughts stole off.

. . . So it came to her as a treble, icy shock when he sighed and said, "Well, I guess it's no bolt from the blue. I guess it's more or less what I really expected. Ever since you met—West. I think that's what I sensed in the air when I got here, that's why I started hurrying. I should have known it was no use."

She stopped and turned to him, her lips parted, her brows frowning, heavy with surprise . . .

. . . The anger, the feeling of intrusion, even the first uneasiness . . . could . . . was *that* . . .

He saw that her shock was genuine and he smiled, kindly but a little slyly. "You don't mean to say," he said, "that you didn't even suspect it about yourself?"

Damn Roy, she thought as she went up to her room. She had imagined this moment otherwise, and what he'd said had upset her and spoiled the feelings she had planned for now.

The drawing-room clock showed that it was well after five when they got home. She learned that there had been no calls and no callers. So she went upstairs, as she had planned, to write the letter. But she had envisaged this as a great calm moment, high and serene, spheres above the clouds, and what Roy had said stayed with her, echoed in her and made serenity impossible.

Well, it was probably just as well. This way she wouldn't get sententious or begin to think of herself as Sydney Carton. This would keep it from being anything but a simple and straightforward action.

So she wrote the letter almost abstractedly, hurriedly, as if it were no more than an invitation to tea. It was short and to the point. She told Mayor Dell that she was just back from a trip and had learned that in her absence Mr.

Van Nuys had sworn out an affidavit alleging certain facts. She was in a position to give the mayor and the Town Commission further, perhaps contradictory information about the matters in the affidavit. She would appreciate an appointment at his early convenience.

"That's all." She smiled faintly. "No trumpets. No cheers. No laurels." Not even self-induced exaltation. No, not even the power to concentrate on what she was doing. Damn Roy.

She sealed the envelope and stamped it, and closed the door of her room behind her. As she came down the stairs, she saw Victor West in the hall below. He was taking off his hat, evidently just returned.

He glanced up and saw her. "Hello, Eleanor. You been wondering where I've been?"

She stopped and looked down at him. She thought, It's all right to be as dizzy as you like, for your mind to whirl like a top, but try not to look a fool. Try not to stare as if you'd never seen him before . . .

"Well, I've been over to the General Hospital," he said. "I think maybe I've got a job. They need someone in the office there and my experience fits, they say. They're writing to Dr. Rickard."

. . . Nod. Even if you can't speak, at least push your head forward . . . up and down. . . .

She saw him begin to tell her more, then change his mind, then look at her as if to ask what the trouble was, then perceive that there was no trouble. She saw him come to the foot of the stairs, put his hand on the banister and look up at her.

Damn that Roy! . . . No, thank Roy . . . for tearing the curtain off the hidden door, for turning the key . . .

As she looked at Victor West now, this man before her, she began to see him sensibly, like a child newly taught to read to whom baffling symbols suddenly reveal beauties.

She saw how it had begun, before she had ever met him; how she had grown to him, climbed to his side. At last they had met, face to face.

She came down to him, close. "Listen," she said, "I have something to tell you." She told—and really it was almost silly how short, how easy it was to tell—the chain of circumstances that had led to the letter in her hand. It didn't take her two minutes. And while she spoke, part of her remembered that this was the man for whom she had waited in front of the Library lion, the man in whose welcoming city she had exulted, the glimpse above the grownups' shoulders . . .

When she had finished, they stood there at the bottom of the stairs. She felt purged and perfect, with the calmness she had wished for on this night. It was he who had changed now. His face seemed somehow new, a fresh impression from the same die. His eyes were deeper, with a nearly audible, speaking warmth.

He put his hand on hers, but he didn't talk, thank Heaven, he didn't say anything. He simply let himself be there.

Then at last the wry smile came back to his face, sad and hopeful. He said, "I'll walk along to the mailbox with you. All right?"

Behind them the drawing-room clock struck six. The golden notes spun out ahead of them like heralds before princes.

She took his hand. "All right," she said.

THE HIDDEN HERO

by Stanley Kauffmann

A SUSPENSE STORY WITH A DIFFERENCE

THIS is a novel about a man and a woman who each must make a kind of atonement and reassertion for past cowardice. One bears the weight of ultra-respectability, the other the burden of hero-worship; and as Eleanor Shafer seeks with growing urgency the trail of her childhood hero, Earl Seastrom, through the back country of Mexico, the character development and the exciting search mount in intensity to a moving climax.

It is a very readable book with plenty of suspense and action and, simultaneously, a serious problem novel with especially strong appeal.

The author is a New Yorker who has written two previously published novels, *THE KING OF PROXY STREET* and *THIS TIME FOREVER*, as well as over forty published plays. One of these plays, *Babino*, was produced at the Adelphi Theatre in New York in 1944.

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